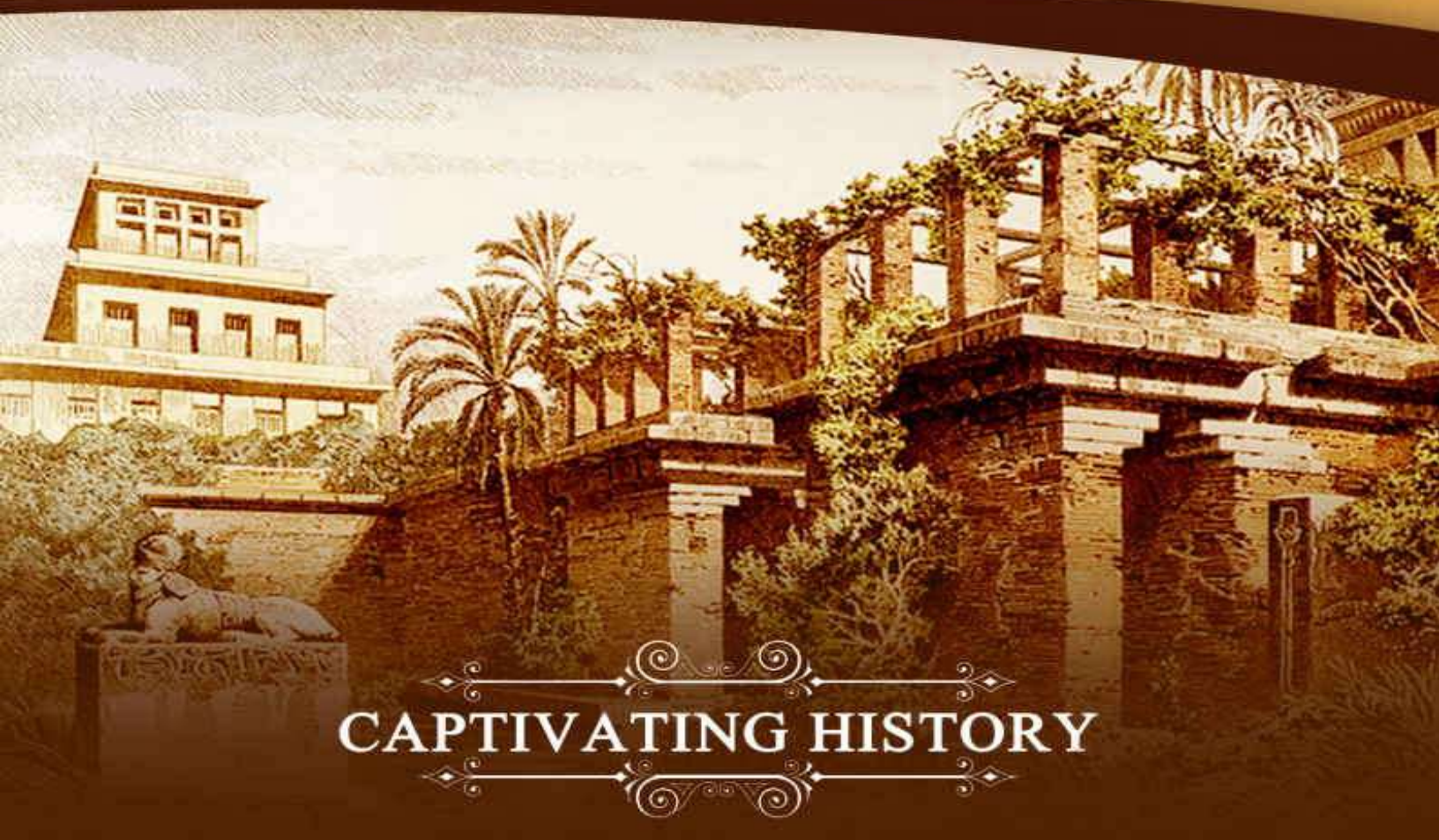
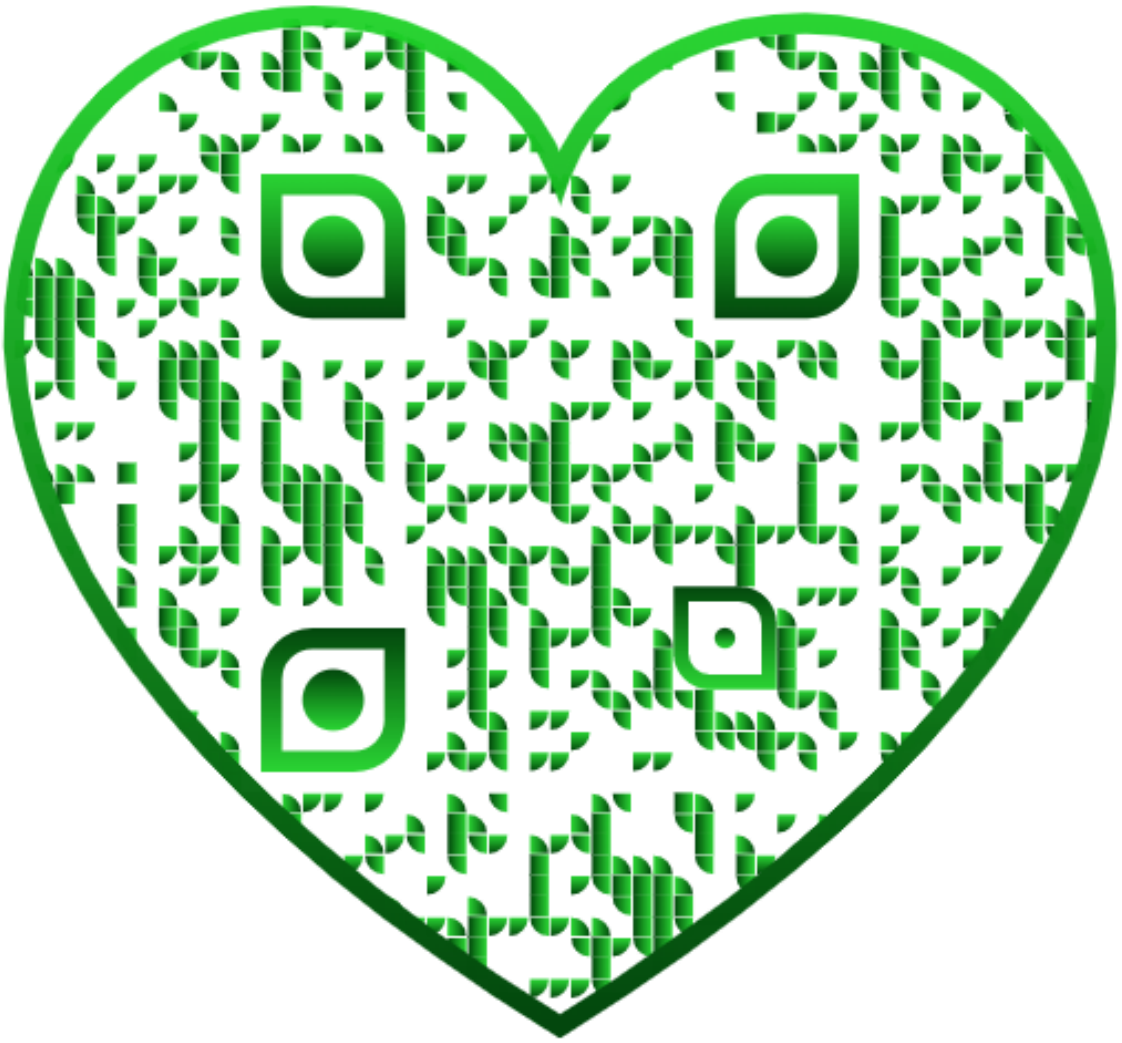
MESOPOTAMIAN CITIES

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO ERIDU, URUK, UR, AKKAD, ASSUR, LAGASH, BABYLON, NIPPUR, NIMRUD, AND NINEVEH



CAPTIVATING HISTORY



Mesopotamian Cities

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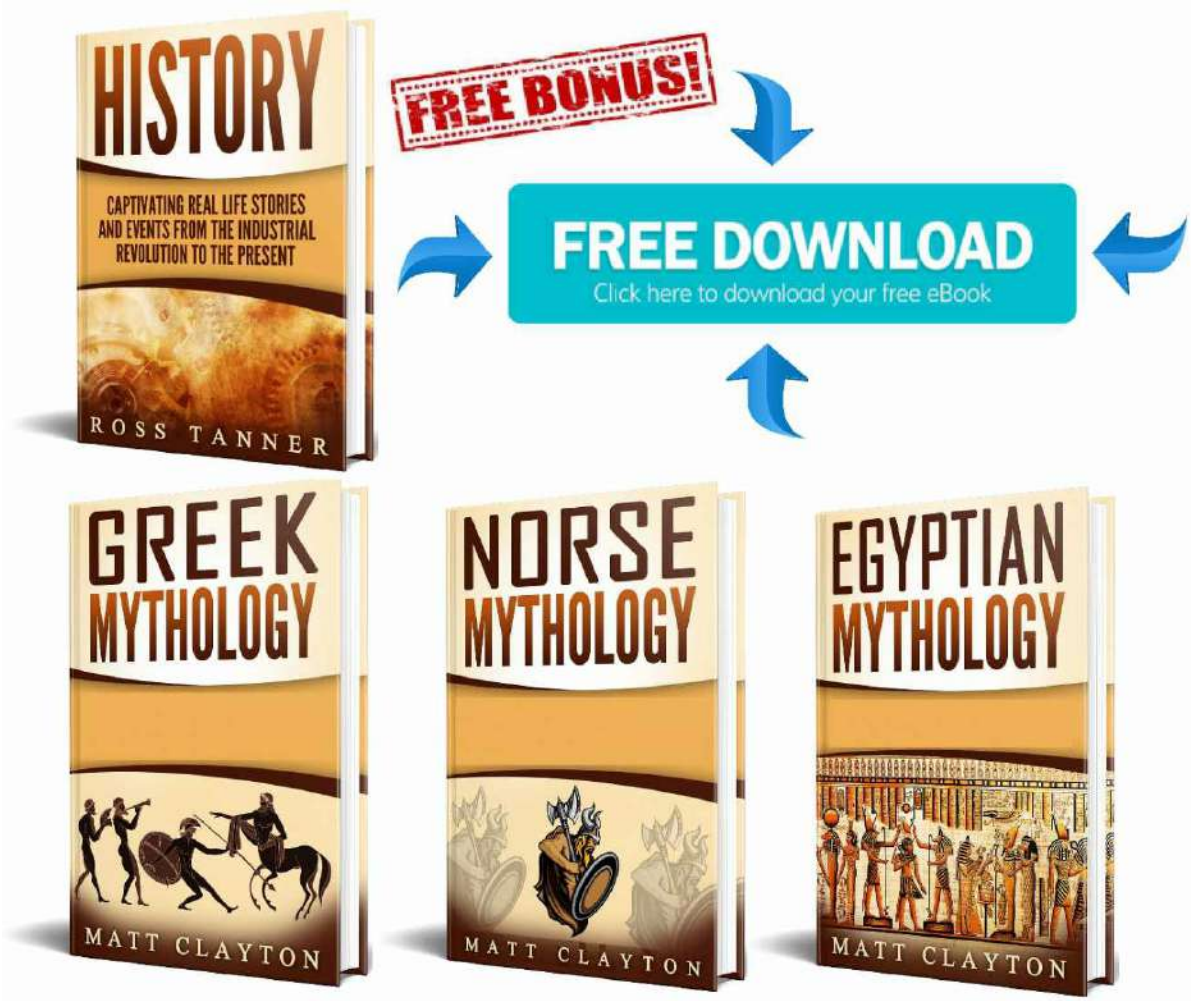

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Introduction

The story of civilization begins with a small strip of land located between two massive rivers in the area that now makes up parts of Kuwait, Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. It starts with a region that held the perfect conditions for the development of agriculture and blossomed into the world's first cities. Over thousands of years, it became the home of complex civilizations that formed dynasties and empires that seemingly rose and fell overnight.

Historians have found abundant evidence of what life was like in ancient Mesopotamia, and in their findings, they discovered a blueprint of modern-day life. These early cultures formed the basis of many things that we take for granted today. Without that comparatively small strip of land, life, as we know it today, would be unrecognizable.

As mankind began to settle down in the fertile region, they found it necessary and easy to form larger and larger communities. In time, the first cities were built. These city-states had rich cultures with their own traditions and religions. Unfortunately, this diversity led to clashes and power struggles, and in time, empires began to form, with the Akkadians being the first to unify the region.

What happened to the cities that once controlled the region? Did they survive by adapting to life under Akkadian rule, or were they destroyed? The first part of this book is dedicated to discovering these individual cities and finding out what their ultimate ends were.

The story behind the empires that developed from those cities will also give insight into later powerhouses such as Egypt and Greece, as Mesopotamia had a dynamic influence on the ancient world. For example, after the Akkadian Empire broke apart, the Babylonian and Assyrian Empires emerged and would engage in near-constant warfare until there was a clear victor. However, the ancient Mesopotamians were more than warriors. They were innovative people who built majestic palaces and impressive infrastructure to strengthen their empires.

What did these empires look like? How were they governed? And what happened to them? Part two of this book will focus on the Akkadian and Assyrian cities. You will learn about their people, their architecture, and the original "Sin City."

The most famous empire to come from the Mesopotamian region is

undoubtedly Babylon. It once dominated the known world and was at the forefront of innovation. Today, it is a collection of stones buried in the desert.

Besides engineering some of the most advanced buildings of the ancient world, the Babylonians also developed advanced mathematics, including the base 60 system. This system created the 60-second minute, the 60-minute hour, and the 360-degree circular angle, all of which we still use today.

The Babylonians were the first to map out the sky and divide what they saw into constellations. Their research led to the twelve-month year and the seven-day week. Did you know that they named the days of the weeks after their seven gods? Who were these gods? What impact did they have on the daily life of an ordinary Babylonian?

However, their most valuable contribution to the world was their writing system. At first, they started with simple pictures that described what they saw, but this soon developed into cuneiform that formed the basis for twelve major languages. This script was later used to record the Code of Hammurabi, which formed the basis of many future law systems.

What happened to Babylon? What is it about this empire that still fascinates people thousands of years after its destruction? And what about the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Did they exist, or was it all an elaborate myth? Part three of this book features the rise and fall of Babylon, where you will discover the answers to all these questions and more.

There are countless fascinating myths that surround Mesopotamia, as well as numerous religions that governed the lives of the people in the area. How did their gods influence their decisions? The Mesopotamian empires ruled with absolute power, but how did their gods play a part in making that possible? These are the questions that the final part of the book will cover. If you’re a fan of myths and legends, you will enjoy part four immensely.

This book is a comprehensive guide to that bygone era and will give you a glimpse into what life was like when these cities battled for dominance while discovering complex systems that influence our lives today. Discover what lies underneath the deserts of the Middle East and be transported back to a time when people built awe-inspiring temples to be connected to their gods.

Their contributions to modern society don’t end with their interesting history, as we can credit the Mesopotamians with the wheel, common tools, the domestication of animals, and irrigation. While none of the Mesopotamian empires rule anymore, their discoveries still influence the lives of billions of

people.

Ancient Mesopotamia has fascinated people for thousands of years. This was where humankind first began to settle down and learn more about the world around them.

It may be intimidating to start this explorative journey, but by using simple language to break down some of history's most crucial inventions, this book will guide you through this fascinating period in mankind's past. Prior knowledge isn't needed to understand the topics, and people of all ages will find everything they need to know about Mesopotamia and more.

You are about to discover the cradle of civilization, and your view of the ancient world will never be the same again.

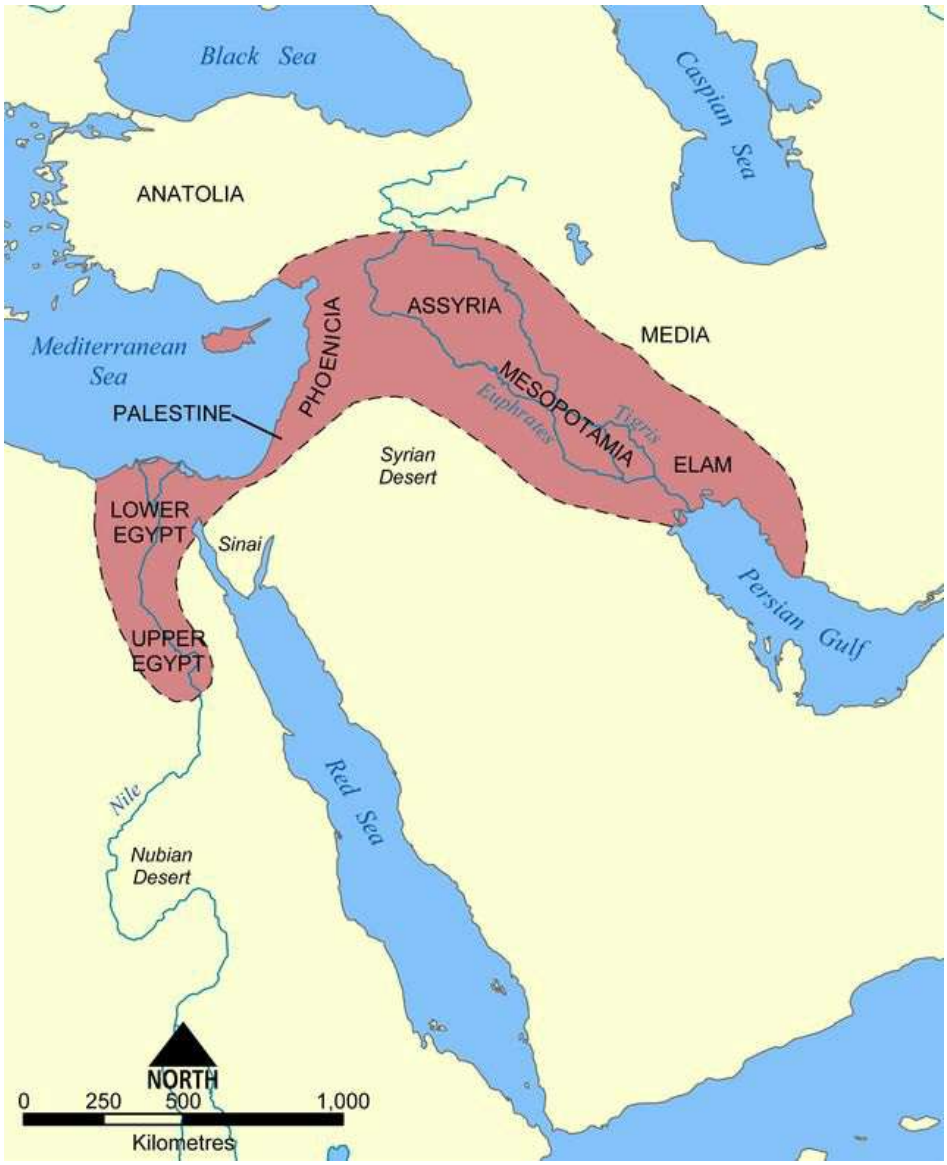
PART ONE: Ancient Mesopotamia: The First Cities

Chapter 1 – What Is Mesopotamia?

Mesopotamia can be found in the region between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in the Middle East. These rivers were integral to the rise of civilization in the area, as they contributed to the fertility of the land. Many of the areas supported farming without artificial irrigation, so people were able to grow crops all year long, which led to bountiful harvests and opportunities for trade. The importance of the rivers is reflected in the name Mesopotamia, as it was created using the words “meso” meaning “between” and “potamos” meaning “river.”

It is important to understand the significance of Mesopotamia’s geography, as it played a large role in the development of civilization. Factors such as climate, flora, fauna, landforms, and ecosystems all determined why ancient people acted in certain ways. If the landscape of Mesopotamia had been any different, nomadic tribes probably would have settled somewhere else. Thousands of years ago, mankind made the shift from pastoral clans to established societies, and a crescent-shaped stretch of land helped to facilitate that change.

The Fertile Crescent



The Fertile Crescent during ancient times

The area that we know as Mesopotamia is bordered by the Zagros Mountains in the northeast, the Arabian Plateau in the southwest, the Persian Gulf in the far south, and the Anti-Taurus Mountains in the northwest. The soil of this area is extremely fertile, which ancient nomads quickly discovered. In recent history, the region has come to be known as the "Fertile Crescent." The name was made popular by archaeologist James Henry Breasted in his book *Outlines of European History* in 1914.

People first started settling in the Fertile Crescent during the Neolithic period (also known as the Agricultural Revolution), which marked the period of human history in which people went from nomadic tribes to civilized agricultural communities. Instead of fading into obscurity, the area became

home to the earliest societies during the Bronze Age.

On a map, the Fertile Crescent forms an almost perfect semi-circle; it begins in the Mediterranean and ends in the Persian Gulf, with the middle backed by the northern mountains of the region. For most of its history, the Fertile Crescent has been a source of dispute due to its rich natural resources and prime geographical location. Today, the Fertile Crescent is made up of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, and parts of Turkey and Iran.

The land is made fertile by nutritious silt that comes from the mountains and is transported by the river system. Before people settled in Mesopotamia, they were mostly hunters and gatherers who occasionally dabbled in farming. As they began to settle down in the region, they discovered that they were able to farm and began experimenting with various plants in the area.

While the rivers are crucial to the fertility of the Fertile Crescent, they aren't the only factor. The area also forms a natural bridge between North Africa and Eurasia, which means that it naturally has more biodiversity than any other area. The region is extremely diverse, with high mountains and vast desert plains.

Due to these different climates, there's a great variety of edible plants, which provided opportunities for early civilizations to begin experimenting with farming and agriculture. In fact, it became home to the eight founder crops. These are plant species that were cultivated by Neolithic farmers. They are the foundation of agriculture as we know it today and include Einkorn wheat, Emmer wheat, barley, lentils, peas, chickpeas, bitter vetch, and flax or linseed.

Wheat grown in the Fertile Crescent

The area was also home to some of the first domesticated animals—goats, sheep, cows, and pigs. While farming was crucial to the development of permanent settlements, the domestication of animals was also very important. Domesticated animals provided protection, clothing, food, and labor, all of which were needed when humans began to settle down. As people made a home in the Fertile Crescent, they found the wild goat. These animals could be used as a source of meat and milk or to make clothes. This likely kept people alive as they were beginning to figure out necessary processes such as irrigation and plant cultivation. In time, other animals were also selectively bred for their desirable traits.

Now that people could grow their own food and keep their own animals, what came next?

The Importance of Irrigation and Farming

As people began to farm and grow their own crops, they quickly realized that they were subject to the unpredictable rivers that governed the land. The rivers would flood and destroy crops, or there would be long droughts that would cause their crops to wither away. They had to learn to deal with either too much water or too little. Despite being extremely fertile, the land was made up of swamps and deserts. In some places, it was too wet to plant crops or too dry to sustain agriculture. How would they solve this problem? A

solution began to emerge, for these early farmers discovered irrigation.

A relief of early farming practices

Irrigation had been practiced on a small scale in other areas of the world, but the Mesopotamians were the first to develop planned irrigation and use it on a large scale. Due to the diverse geography of the area, they found a way to drain water from the marshes and direct that water to where it was most needed.

The first farmers used primitive plows to dig the ground and kept water jugs on hand to feed the plants. While this was effective, it wasn't sustainable and required more intensive labor. And when the rivers flooded, these crops would be swept away. Archaeologists have found evidence of irrigation canals that date back to 6000 BCE. These primitive canals brought water from the rivers to carefully cultivated fields. Eventually, farmers also built dams that would hold back the unpredictable floods. Slowly, these farmers learned to manage the water that brought essential silt to their crops. Soon, laborers were brought in to remove blockages from the canals or rebuild dam walls that had collapsed. With more workers came more families and the greater need for crops. In time, settlements grew larger and more complex.

The irrigation of the Mesopotamian region was made easier thanks to melting snow from the Zagros Mountains. Once the snow melted, it traveled down from the mountains and joined the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, causing these water bodies to swell. As people began to develop and refine their irrigation systems, the first urban civilizations emerged, as well as the political systems that would govern them.

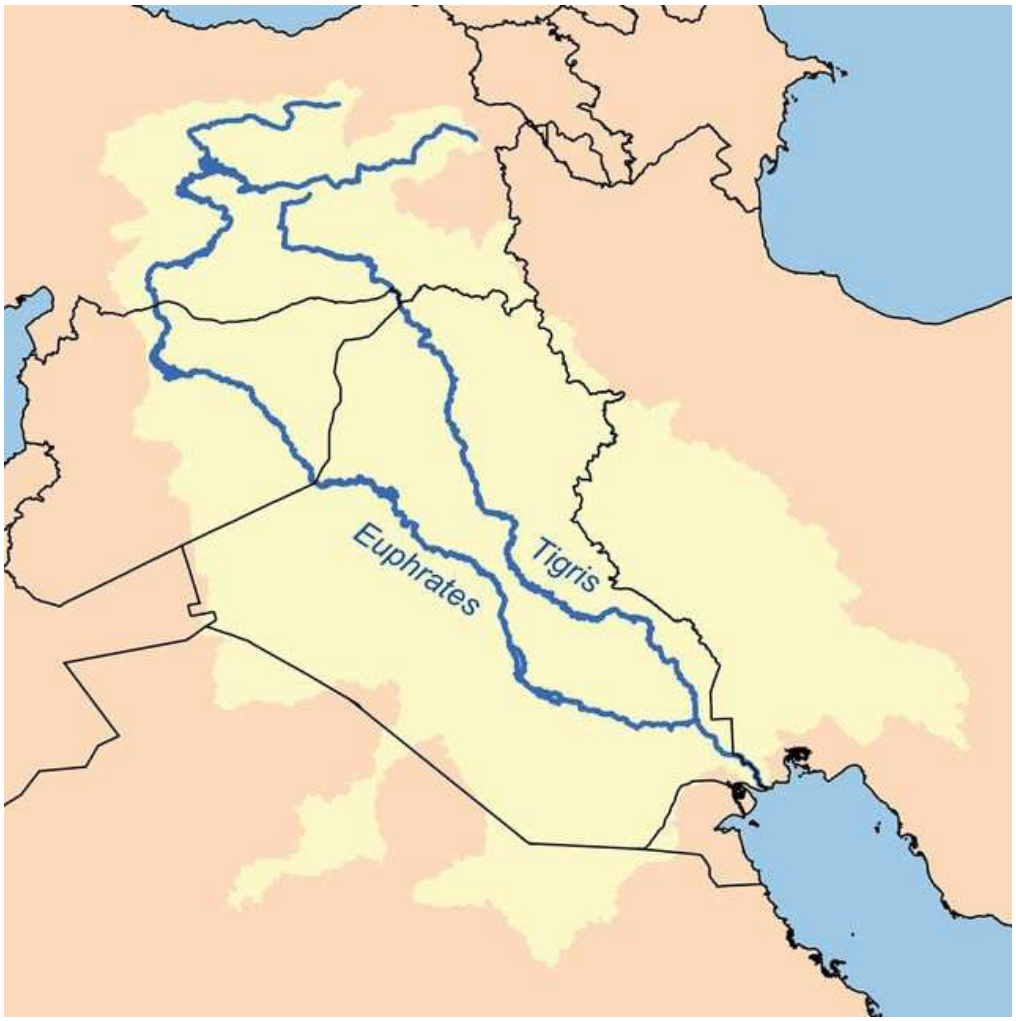
The Sumerians were the first to recognize that their irrigation systems could be enlarged, and they organized a massive building project. They built causeways along the banks of the Euphrates to prevent flooding and employed workers to dig canals that would drain marshes and support crops. As their irrigation systems became more advanced, they realized that their irrigation systems would have to be protected and controlled through strict laws. Without proper organization and regulations, the irrigation systems would become a source of conflict, and production would stall. Farmers had to work together to make sure that the work continued without disruption. Strict laws ensured this cooperation, and the Code of Hammurabi (the earliest set of written laws) imposed heavy fines on thieves or negligent farmers.

Due to the semi-arid climate of the region, there weren't massive forests that people could use to build wooden infrastructure, which meant that they had to rely on rock and clay. As buildings became more advanced and as projects became larger and more complex, the people found that they needed different building materials. In time, societies began to use the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers to trade goods, which led to a complex system of trade routes that brought greater prosperity to the region.

Irrigation has always been important to human civilization, but it depends largely on laborers and construction materials. Without a large enough workforce and materials to maintain the infrastructure, it will fail, as will the farms that they sustain. Irrigation played an important role in the rise and fall of the Mesopotamian empires. As the population shifted and fluctuated due to political or economic influences, the effects on the workforce and trade routes were immediate and devastating.

There's no doubt that the development of irrigation and farming assisted in creating the great empires that arose in the Mesopotamian region. However, none of that would have been possible without the Tigris-Euphrates river system.

The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers



Map of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers

Both the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers begin in the Taurus Mountains about fifty miles (eighty kilometers) apart from each other and are fed by a number of smaller rivers that make up the large Tigris-Euphrates river system, which eventually drains out into the Persian Gulf. The land alternates between large deserts in the north with marshes and lagoons in the south.

The Tigris River is the shorter of the two, spanning about 1,180 miles (1,900 kilometers). It got its name from the Sumer word *Idigna*, which can be translated to “swift river.”

The Tigris River

The Euphrates is about 1,740 miles (2,800 kilometers) and is thought to have been named after the Old Persian word *Ufratu*, which means “good to cross over.”

The Euphrates River

The rivers are usually categorized into three parts: the upper, middle, and lower courses. Their upper parts are located mostly in modern-day Turkey. The land is made up of gorges and valleys, which lie about 6,000 to 10,000 feet (1,800 to 3,000 meters) above sea level. The middle courses are located in northern Syria and Iraq, with their elevations being at 170 to 1,200 feet (50 to 370 meters) above sea level. The lower levels stretch across central Iraq, and they go through a flat plain before emptying out into the sea.

Over the past seven thousand years, both rivers have changed as a result of irrigation and natural causes. The land is riddled with fossils, ancient settlements, and canal systems, all of which give us insight into the lives of the people who settled along the rivers. In fact, they are almost unrecognizable when compared to what they look like today and how they looked in ancient times. The changing watercourses may have played a massive role in the downfall of many Mesopotamian civilizations. As the water changed and brutal wars ripped through the area, people may have found the need to abandon their homes and find new places to live.

The flow of both rivers has always depended on rain during the winter and the snow that melts on the tops of the Zagros and Taurus Mountains. Since the Tigris is shorter than the Euphrates, it tends to flood quickly, and its

flooding period is usually a month before the Euphrates. Without these rivers, the region would be uninhabitable, as the climate is harsh and contradictory. In the summer, temperatures average above 90˚F (32˚C) and less than 50˚F (10˚C) in the winter. It's a region that consists of snowcapped mountains and valleys in one area but arid deserts in other areas.

A desert in modern-day Iraq

The rivers brought life to the region. It made the land fertile through silt deposits and allowed for extensive irrigation. Besides that, it provided the perfect home for a variety of useful plants. Thousands of years ago, pistachio, oak, and ash trees covered the mountains where the upper courses of the rivers flowed. In drier areas, camel thorn trees and Prosopis shrubs are more common. Various types of reeds can be found growing along the banks of the rivers and the marshes in wet areas. The giant mardi reed can grow up to twenty-five feet (eight meters) and is an excellent building material.

The Euphrates is also the home of various species of poplars, including the Euphrates poplar, which is used for construction and boat building (which would become very important as trade routes began to develop). Date palms, tamarisk, mesquite, and licorice also grow naturally in the region, and they became important exports that brought prosperity to the Mesopotamians.

The Euphrates and Tigris also facilitated trade and travel in the area, which

made it easier for large cities to develop. These trade routes allowed the Mesopotamians to interact with the rest of the ancient world and were vital parts of the empires that ruled the region.

Trade Routes

Mesopotamia was home to many different people thanks to the way the rivers connected the region, which made trade easier. Due to the fertility of the land and the onset of irrigation, Mesopotamia had plenty of agricultural items to trade. They had more dairy, fruits, vegetables, fish, nuts, and meat than they knew what to do with. Once people had enough to eat, complex social systems began to emerge. They developed different needs as they developed religious practices, which involved fertility rites and magic.

The rivers also provided clay and reeds that they could use to build better buildings. However, as a noble class began to develop, more luxury items were needed. Their construction projects became more elaborate and needed stronger building materials. The Mesopotamians found that they had enough for their basic needs, but their needs were becoming more complex. As a result, traders started traveling greater distances to satisfy these demands.

Trade was a lucrative business, and trading outposts soon dotted the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates. Ancient Mesopotamia has long been credited with the invention of the wheel, which made it easier to trade heavy goods. Traders were now able to transport larger quantities over greater distances.

They quickly discovered that it was easier to use caravans, which are large groups of people who travel together and use pack animals to carry goods. This was practical for a number of reasons. Safety would have been a concern, and caravans were less likely to be robbed than lone travelers. Pack animals were also able to carry heavier loads and navigate rocky areas that wagons couldn’t traverse.

A donkey bearing a heavy load, similar to those used by ancient Mesopotamian traders

Once the sail was invented and boats became bigger, the donkey-drawn wagons were loaded onto sailboats. By this time, Mesopotamia was home to a large number of skilled craftsmen who created fine textiles, pottery, leather goods, jewelry, baskets, and ivory carvings, most of which would find homes in ancient temples.

Pottery used by ancient Mesopotamians

Overland routes were developed over the Zagros Mountains to the east, while sea routes were mapped along the rivers down to the Persian Gulf. It wasn't long before these trade routes spanned across the Middle East.

The traders soon found a need to set up trade emporiums in distant cities. By 1700 BCE, they had an emporium set up in Kanesh, Anatolia, now located in modern-day Turkey, which was over a thousand miles from their home. They paid taxes to the local ruler and were allowed to live in their own quarter where they could trade their goods. The life of a trader was one of extensive traveling, and these ancient traders had to keep their wits about them as they lived and worked in foreign lands. It wasn't an easy life, but they formed a vital part of ancient Mesopotamian life.

The Mesopotamian caravans carried goods such as textiles, grains, leather goods, pottery, jewelry, and cooking oil to distant lands. In return, they received tin, gold, ivory, pearls, silver, and copper. Some of these items came from lands as far as Egypt and Persia, proving the extent of Mesopotamian trade.

This intricate trading system didn’t spring up overnight but took hundreds of years of development. Before the Mesopotamians could trade, they first had to develop a need for such luxury items. This became possible since people began to live together in large communities. As their daily needs were taken care of thanks to farming, they began to form social systems, which led to elaborate religions and social hierarchies.

People began to live together in settlements that became increasingly bigger. As nomads became farmers, they needed more labor, and as they grew more prosperous, they needed protection. This came in the form of warriors and walls. People found protection in numbers and started gathering together. Historians have found evidence of this development in the ancient region of Sumer, where the first city of Mesopotamia, Eridu, was built.

Chapter 2 – Eridu: The First City

Eridu is located in Iraq, about 12.5 miles (20 kilometers) away from the ancient city of Ur. Today, it's an arid desert and an archaeological site, but thousands of years ago, it used to be a wetland located in a bend in the Euphrates. It's commonly thought to be the earliest city in the Mesopotamian region. It was certainly one of the first cities built by the ancient Sumerians to honor their gods.

The Sumerians emerged during the Early Bronze Age. They also have the distinction of being one of the first civilizations in the world. By 3000 BCE, they were in control of the Mesopotamian region and maintained their hold on the area through a series of city-states that rose up around temples built at the center, with the rest of the city expanding outward.

Eridu was one of the most important city-states and was viewed as the first of the Sumerian cities. It was founded on a sand dune around 5000 BCE and was consistently occupied for about 4,500 years to around 600 BCE, but it didn't maintain the same level of cultural significance during all those years. The city experienced its peak during 4000 BCE, after which there was a steady decline until the Babylonians rose to prominence.

Although it's little more than a collection of artifacts in the desert today, this was one of the most important cities in human history. No one can be certain about the city's origins, but the Sumerians had a fascinating theory about how Eridu was founded.

The Sumerian Creation Myth and Others

There isn't much left of Sumerian literature, but thanks to a few key artifacts, the Sumerians were able to tell modern people about what they believed. Ancient fragments explain that before the gods, only the earth and the heavens existed. There was no light or vegetation, but everything was green, and all the water was beneath the ground.

Archaeologists rely on various Sumerian myths and poems to paint a picture of how the ancient Sumerians made sense of the world around them. There are various creation myths, but according to the myth of "Gilgamesh and the Netherworld," the heavens and earth were split apart by the gods who later created humankind. From there, the gods divided control of the earth, heavens, and netherworld, with each god receiving their own responsibilities.

The Eridu Genesis, a Sumerian epic, claims that the universe came from a

primeval sea. After the gods were born, they created humans out of clay to care for the ground and worship the gods.

According to “The Song of the Hoe,” the god Enlil is credited with the creation of mankind, but life was grim for those mythical first humans, as they went about naked and ate grass for sustenance. It wasn’t until Enki, the god of wisdom, created the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that humans had a better life. The people of Eridu revered Enki, as they believed that he was the one who created all the cities, although the ancient Babylonians accredited their god Marduk with the creation of Eridu.

As the creation myth progresses, the gods soon became displeased with their worshipers and decided to send an earth-wide flood. The Sumerian account of the flood mirrors many aspects of the biblical flood, but there are a few key differences. In the Sumerian myth, Enki disagrees with the flood and decides to save mankind. He chose a man named Ziusudra, who was known for being a righteous man, and told him to build a boat. After Ziusudra survived the flood, he presented himself to the gods Anu and Enlil. The gods were impressed by his humility and granted him everlasting life.

The Sumerians claimed that Eridu was the home of Enki, who was the god of magic, wisdom, and deep waters. Enki was a local god, but over time, he gained influence and eventually joined a pantheon of gods and was named a ruler of the universe alongside Anu and Enlil.

Enki, Anu, and Enlil were the Mesopotamian triad who ruled over the earth and heavens together, all of whom were among the earliest Sumerian gods. Enki eventually fathered a son named Marduk, who helped him to create the earth. According to a Babylonian myth named the “Enuma Elish,” Enki was born to the first gods, Apsu and Tiamat. These two gods gave birth to many lesser gods, but these lesser gods succeeded in annoying their father to the point where he decided to kill them. When Tiamat heard of this plan, she asked Enki to help. Enki decided that the best course of action was to kill his father.

Tiamat was horrified by what Enki had done, so she decided to punish her children by raising a powerful army of demons and monsters led by Qingu, her champion. This fearsome army kept defeating the younger gods in battle. Eventually, Enki’s son, Marduk, stepped forward with a brilliant plan. If the other gods made him their king, then he would defeat Tiamat’s army. The other gods agreed to this, and Marduk defeated Qingu and shot Tiamat with

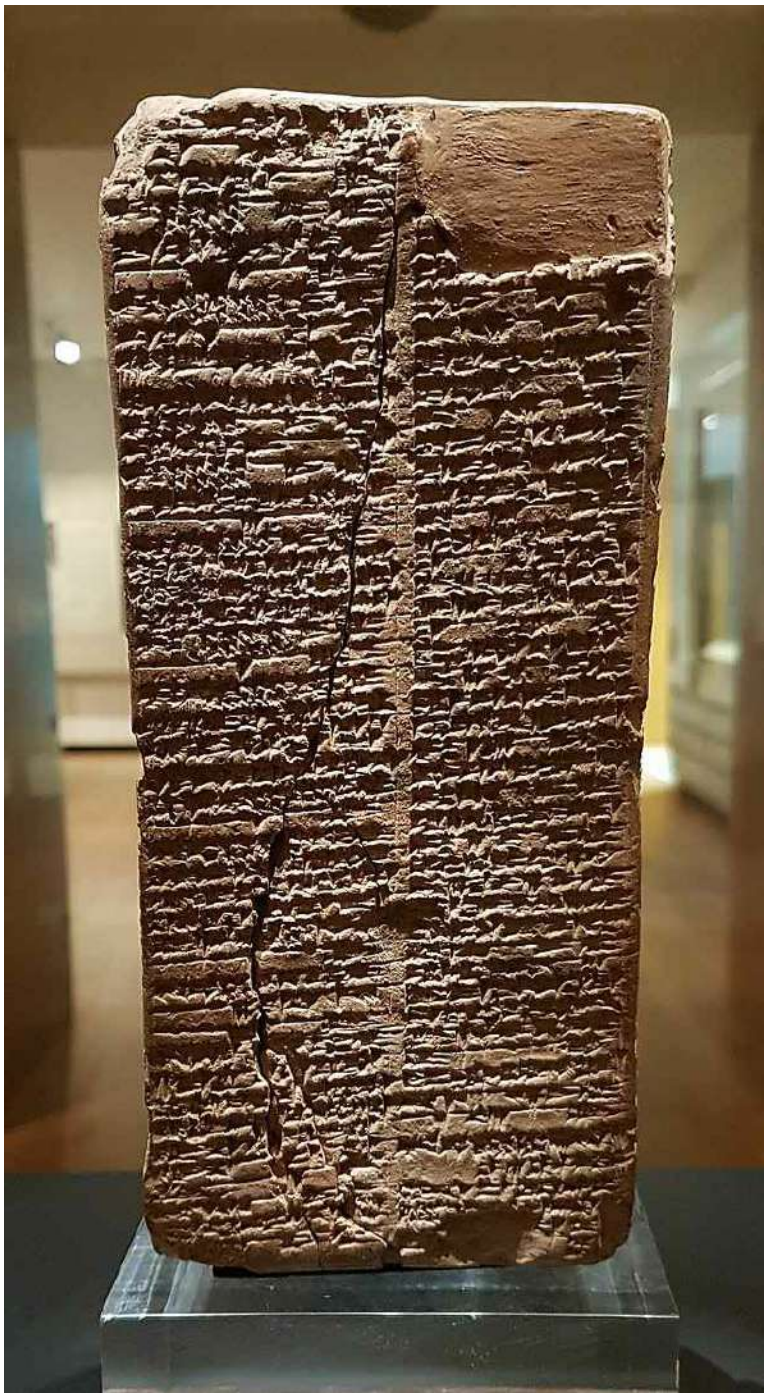
an arrow. Tiamat's tears were turned into the Euphrates and Tigris, while her body was turned into the earth. Marduk then made humans out of Qingu's body.

Another creation myth involves a global deluge and a compassionate and wise Enki. The Atrahasis myth tells of a time when the lesser gods decided to create humans to help care for the earth. Over time, these humans became a nuisance to the great god Enlil, who decided to cut down their number through a series of plagues and disasters. However, each of his plans was thwarted, for Enki came to the humans' rescue by telling them what they had to do to survive. That sent Enlil into a rage, and he decided to send an earth-wide flood. Enki heard of this plan and commanded a faithful man named Atrahasis to build a boat and hid him while Enlil destroyed the rest of the earth.

When the flood was over, Enlil came to regret his actions, but Enki chose that moment to reveal Atrahasis, who promptly provided offerings to the gods. Enki then came up with a plan to keep mankind's population under control by decreeing that some women would have miscarriages, some would have their babies carried away by demons, and some would remain virgins since they were dedicated to the gods.

In most myths, Enki always had a soft spot for humans and would guide them with wisdom and compassion. It's clear to see why the ancient Sumerians chose to give Enki such importance. However, historians have found evidence that Enki may have started out as a high priest to the mother goddess Ninhursag. Over time, Enki became more important and eventually exceeded Ninhursag's influence.

An ancient text called the *Sumerian King List* is used to gain insight into how the region was ruled in ancient times, as it contains information about ancient rulers in ancient Sumer and the neighboring regions. It was originally a piece of political doctrine and was composed by early rulers in the area to establish their rulership. Although it was primarily a political document, it also influenced various pieces of Mesopotamian literature. A lot of the information on the *Sumerian King List* is fairly accurate; however, as it stretches back to the origin of Eridu, it relies on mythology for information. For instance, the list mentions two kings of Eridu, Alulim and Alagar, who ruled for a total of about fifty thousand years.



The Sumerian King List *cuneiform tablet*

While the Mesopotamians offered an interesting explanation of how Eridu was founded, archaeologists have their own theories.

The Rise of Eridu

Archaeologists have found evidence of buildings in Eridu dating back to as early as 6500 BCE during what was known as the Ubaid period. Although

Mesopotamia has been home to countless cultures over the years, there was a brief period around 5500 to 4000 BCE when most of the region shared a common lifestyle. It is defined by a distinctive pottery style and is named after the place where evidence of the period was first discovered.

The Mesopotamians had a habit of building new settlements on top of older buildings, which means that excavations of ancient sites reveal levels or sequences of construction that correspond to certain ages. Archaeologists have found that Eridu was built on a sand dune that had been unoccupied up to that point. Some historians disagree with the *Sumerian King List* and theorize that the first divinity of Eridu was a goddess named Ninhursag, who later became Enki's consort. Ninhursag had her own temple in Eridu.

It is thought that the first village at Eridu eventually grew into a city that spanned twenty to twenty-five acres and comprised of buildings made of mudbrick and reeds. As the Ubaid period began, it's possible that around four thousand people lived in Eridu, which doesn't seem like much when compared to modern cities, but during that period, it would have been an incredible feat.

While Eridu is considered to be one of the first cities on earth, it is important to note that it didn't hold much political influence. Rather, its importance lay in its religious significance. According to the ancient Sumerians, the kingship of Eridu originated in heaven but was eventually brought down to earth by the gods. It's possible that its religious importance kept it from being destroyed when larger and more powerful empires emerged.

Religion was an integral part of Eridu and affected the lives of its citizens in profound ways.

Living in Eridu

Eridu was extremely close to the Euphrates, which meant that fishing was a major industry in the city. Historians have found evidence of reed boats in the area; in fact, the reed boats found at Eridu might be the oldest boats in the world.

As a religious center, the city is known for its many temples or ziggurats. While ancient Egypt is known for its pyramids, ancient Mesopotamia is known for its ziggurats. These were rectangular buildings that housed temples. It's thought that the Tower of Babel referenced in the biblical account may have been a ziggurat.

The oldest temple in Eridu has been dated back to the Ubaid period and was

made up of a single room and an altar or offering table. However, the temples weren't always that simple. Later temples show more elaborate construction, including buttresses and a room in the middle that housed the altar to whichever god the temple was dedicated to.

Mesopotamian ziggurat

One of the most famous ziggurats is the ziggurat of Enki, which people can still see today. The temple is called E-Abzu, which means "Deep Ocean." Evidence shows that this imposing temple started out as a single room with one little altar, where the cult of Enki could bring offerings to their god. However, as Enki gained significance, larger temples were built over that small room. It took hundreds of years for Enki to rise to power, but once he joined the pantheon of gods, he became one of the most powerful. Every so often, his temple was given an upgrade until it dominated the landscape. Some archaeologists even think that Enki had the biggest ziggurat in Mesopotamia. Several excavations have revealed that the temple went through eighteen different restorations.

While the temples of Eridu are certainly impressive, the residents of the city dwelled in simple reed huts. Reeds were bountiful in the area and were a

sturdy building material. The people of Eridu were also experienced pottery makers. Archaeologists have found plenty of pottery pieces and waste produced by kilns. In fact, the sheer amount of pottery found at the site suggests that pottery was a major part of Eridu's economy.

Thanks to its strategic position on the Euphrates and its distinction as the home of Enki, Eridu enjoyed a thriving economy that brought prosperity to its inhabitants. The citizens of the city were more than humble fishermen; they were priests, tradesmen, and artisans. As worshipers came to the city to pay homage to Enki, they would have been able to buy beautiful works of pottery and good food. Religious rites were very important to the ancient Sumerians, and temples and personal shrines were seen as a necessary part of daily life.

Carving of Enki

Temples fulfilled many roles during those days. People could visit the

temples and expect to receive medical services or legal advice. They were also used to distribute goods. E-Abzu probably would have been the most visited place in the city on any given day. It was believed that Enki lived in the deep waters beneath the city, where he was attended to and protected by a collection of mermaids, demons, giants, and much more. Festivals were frequent parts of life in Eridu, with lavish feasts being hosted at the temples. People could choose to worship either at the temples or at private shrines at home.

Thanks to its distinguished position as Enki's home, Eridu enjoyed hundreds of years of religious significance and prosperity. Religious laws and traditions were decided in Eridu, and the rest of Mesopotamia made sure to take its lead. However, Eridu eventually fell into decay and was ultimately abandoned.

The Fall of Eridu

As a religious epicenter, Eridu would have been a popular destination for pilgrims and merchants. Since religion and politics were intimately intertwined in Mesopotamia, it also would have attracted powerful rulers and their entourages. Thousands of visitors would have come and gone, all of whom needed feeding and resources. Over time, the land simply could not keep up with the demand anymore.

Eridu didn't maintain the same level of importance all throughout its lifetime, and it probably experienced fluctuations in popularity due to factors such as droughts and conflicts. However, it usually bounced back when the people returned, and it managed to retain its importance well into the reign of the Babylonians. It was even believed that Eridu was the home of the Neo-Babylonian royal family. Historians aren't completely sure why people left and didn't come back, but by 600 BCE, the city had been completely abandoned, and its political power had shifted to Uruk.

During the height of Eridu's influence, it was a hub of trade, culture, and religion. People from all over the ancient world visited its shores, and thanks to its position on the Persian Gulf, it was able to support that level of activity for hundreds of years, much longer than some of its contemporaries. Eridu was founded because of its strategic position, but when the people overworked the land, it stopped giving. And without the resources needed to maintain their lifestyles, the people moved on.

Eridu's Legacy

In 1854, J. G Taylor excavated a tell named Abu Shahrain. A tell is a mound of remains that is made up out of the artifacts left behind from a series of consecutive settlements. Excavations at the tell were resumed in 1918 by Reginald Campbell Thompson, while H. R Hall continued the work in 1919. The third excavation was conducted between 1946 and 1948 by Fouad Safar and Seton Lloyd. In 2008, the site was revisited, and the site is now being researched by a group made out of Italians, Iraqis, and French. The site was also added to the World Heritage List as part of the Iraqi wetlands.

The wetlands of southern Iraq

Eridu was a fascinating place that is shrouded in myth. As one of the oldest cities in the world, it is worthy of repeated research and excavations. It continues to give us clues about the lives of the ancient Sumerians and how they thought. While it may have started as a single settlement on top of a dune with a single-roomed temple, it became a mighty center of trade and influence. It maintained its power for hundreds of years while lesser cities fell around it. As empires rose and fell, various cultures found a way to incorporate the city into their myths and legends, affording it the kind of respect that prevented it from being destroyed during times of war. The ancient Mesopotamians treated Eridu with respect, as they recognized that it

was their oldest city. It was ancient in their day, and they couldn’t pinpoint its exact origin, so they wrapped its beginnings in myths and decided that it was the home of their most powerful god.

According to them, Eridu was favored and loved by the gods, so they revered the city and rebuilt its temples. However, in time, the city fell into ruin and obscurity, as people placed greater importance on other cities. Its days of lavish feasts and busy markets are now over, but in the desolate mounds of sand, we can find evidence of a rich bygone era where people experienced a golden age of prosperity. As important as Eridu was to the ancient Sumerians, it wasn’t their most important city. No, that distinction belonged to the cities of Ur and Uruk.

Chapter 3 – The City of Uruk

South of Baghdad, Iraq, lies the ruins of a city that singlehandedly changed the ancient world. As people started yearning for a different kind of life from the small rural settlements they once knew, they gravitated to Uruk, and the first big city was born.

While Eridu is the oldest city in Mesopotamia, Uruk became the first urbanized city, with the facets we now associate with city life were formed there. It became the home to tens of thousands of people who developed social hierarchies and ruling dynasties. People worked together and came up with impressive feats that were carried to the rest of the world. This was where mankind first began to write things down and keep records.

They also began to experiment with stone architecture and the cylinder seal, which was a vital part of life for the Mesopotamians. The city of Uruk has been excavated many times, and historians keep finding new fascinating facts about the city. It also provides the setting for the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a story about a king who went to great lengths to attain immortality.

Archaeological excavations at Uruk

There was a time when Uruk was the most important city in ancient Mesopotamia, and it's time to find out why.

Origin of Uruk

The *Sumerian King List* names the founder of Uruk as King Enmerkar around the year 4500 BCE. By 4000 BCE, the region had become the home of domestic animals such as sheep and goats, while farmers had learned how to grow crops such as wheat and barley. Thanks to the Euphrates and Tigris

Rivers, the people who settled in the area were able to farm a surplus of crops, which eventually led to an easier way of life for some and paved the way for a social elite to form.

Historians theorize that two separate Ubaid settlements merged into one to form a massive city. The city consisted of two districts, the Eanna and Anu, which lends credence to the theory that the city merged from two settlements. The Anu district was dedicated to the Sumerian god of the sky, Anu. It was built on a natural terrace. The Eanna district was dedicated to Anu's granddaughter, the goddess Inanna. Each district had a temple at its heart, and like the temples at Eridu, these complexes served multiple functions. Anu was the older district, while Eanna was walled off from the rest of the city and was the home of several workshops. It seemed to be the industrial area.

Historians aren't sure if the Eanna district was walled off for religious purposes or if ancient builders found it necessary to do so for some reason. Some historians theorize that the district was walled off since Inanna was a very particular goddess and may have wanted privacy from her family member, whose temple was very close to her own. However, there may be a darker reason for this separation. Ancient Mesopotamia was the home of various powerful goddesses, but in time, those goddesses faded into obscurity as male gods were afforded greater prestige. Around the time the goddesses lost power, women's rights also took a hit. The wall may have been built to separate Inanna's temple for this reason, but it cannot be said for sure.

Carving excavated at Uruk

No matter the reason for the wall that separated the two districts, Inanna played an important role in the founding of Uruk, at least according to the Sumerian myth “Inanna and the God of Wisdom.” The myth states that Inanna stole a series of divine decrees from her father, the god Enki. These decrees were crucial to Sumerian culture, as they were the pattern of life that the Sumerians modeled their lives after as set forth by their gods. This pattern

was known as the *meh.*

The ancient Sumerians placed great significance on the city of Eridu, so when the sacred *meh* was stolen, it showed that power had now moved to Uruk. According to the myth, Inanna outwitted Enki, and despite his repeated efforts to retrieve the *meh*, it was too late, as it now rested in Uruk.

While the myth of Inanna may have explained the sudden transference of power to those living back then, historians have found a less fantastical explanation. Eridu represented the old way of life. It was a rural city with outmoded customs, while Uruk was the new way of life. It was a shining city with new ways that attracted people who wanted to leave the old ways behind. There are numerous examples of this in human history, and we have seen the same cycle repeated in other areas of the world. However, to the ancient Sumerians, this was caused by their gods, meaning they had no say in the matter.

Rise of Uruk

As the Ubaid period ended around 4100 BCE, it was followed by the Uruk period that lasted from 4100 BCE to 2900 BCE. There is evidence that by the time the Uruk period began to enter its final stages, forty thousand people lived in Uruk, along with ninety thousand in the surrounding area, which would have made it the largest city in the world.

There are eight phases of the Uruk period, which range from the oldest to the times when the city was most important. The phases are related to the levels of excavations of the city's ruins. Each phase reveals something fascinating about the ancient city.

Uruk's influence stretched all over Mesopotamia, as archaeologists have found objects from Uruk in nearly every other site in Mesopotamia. The Uruk period is a bit of a puzzle, as Ur logically should have been the most influential city due to its position as a trade powerhouse. While Ur eventually became more important, and greater kingdoms rose to power, Uruk still holds an important place in Mesopotamian history.

At one time, priests enjoyed the greatest power in the area, but in time, they had to share that power with the heads of warrior tribes. Eventually, kings came to rule the city-states. The first evidence of writing in the form of cuneiform has been found in Uruk, which provides us with ample evidence of how Uruk developed and what life was like back then for the average citizen. Uruk saw the beginning of urbanization and a great many other firsts, which

were then taken to the rest of the world.

Uruk and Urbanization

The process of urbanization begins when a rural community attracts residents and expands until it becomes a bustling metropolis. This process has been repeated all throughout the world for thousands of years, but it first began in Mesopotamia in Uruk. Archaeologists have spent years studying the site, digging down into the ground and finding evidence of incredible advancements by the residents of the city. The first layers of the city are still shrouded in mystery and will no doubt shed further light on the city's history over time.

Historians aren't quite sure why people moved to Uruk in the first place. Some think that the shift was voluntary and that the fertile region attracted a tribe of nomads and enticed them to start a village. From there, people would have moved to the town voluntarily in search of a new life. However, some seem to think that people didn't choose to move to Uruk but were rather forced to do so by their leaders, who would have wanted more control over the land. Either way, people moved en masse to Uruk, causing it to become the largest city of its time.

One of the most important factors that aided Uruk's rapid urbanization was the development of writing and communication. Historians theorize that the ancient Mesopotamians had some sort of primitive communication system in place before they developed writing, but during the Uruk period, people began keeping records of transactions and noting important events.

Ancient Sumerians developed cuneiform script by using reed styluses to carve figures into clay tablets. This was a prudent decision, as the clay tablets would last longer than silk or papyrus. These clay tablets have been invaluable in discovering what life was like in Uruk. The first cuneiform were simple wedge-shaped indentations and didn't represent a single language. This was why it was able to be used by multiple cultures all throughout the region.

Cuneiform tablet

Eventually, those indentations were grouped together to form syllables, and the clay tablets were replaced with stone. The Mesopotamians used cuneiform to record transactions, stories, laws, maps, and other information that could be shared and used through the years. This unified style of communication no doubt helped with trade and the economy, which would have attracted more people to Uruk and caused it to become even more of an urban hub in the region. In time, however, people began developing alphabets, and the art of reading and understanding cuneiform was lost to the ages. It wasn't until relatively recently that archaeologists were able to decipher those stone and clay tablets, and they were surprised by the wealth of information they found stored there.

Life in Uruk

The quality of life in Uruk depended greatly on a person's occupation and social status. Most residents were farmers or day laborers. Their lives consisted of working in the fields, maintaining irrigation systems, and working with farm equipment. The heart of the city consisted of tradesmen, artisans, and a priestly class. The priests were at the top of the social hierarchy and spent most of their time in the towering ziggurats. Their lives consisted of religious ceremonies, but they also searched for omens and practiced astrology.

When the privilege of ruling was transferred from the priests to tribal leaders and later kings, the priests spent a lot of their time serving the needs of their new rulers. These kings spent most of their time maintaining order and making important decisions, which meant they relied heavily on guidance from the gods, who spoke through the priests. This ensured that the priests always held a prominent spot in society.

Although complex social systems began to develop, there were a few things that all the residents in Uruk shared. During this period, most of the people in Mesopotamia began using stamp or cylinder seals. These seals acted as personal signatures for individuals and were highly valued in Mesopotamian culture. In fact, historians theorize that the use of seals preceded cuneiform. Each resident had their seal personalized, and it would be used during transactions and sometimes doubled as charms to ward off evil. Losing a seal was massively inconvenient and needed to be avoided at all costs. When a seal was lost, a person had to report it to an official who would record it so that they could prevent fraud. Since they couldn't carve their likeness on the seal, it would have been easy for an enterprising criminal to parade around as someone else. Most people wore their seals attached to a leather strap around their neck.

Mesopotamian cylinder seal

Early seals included simple details such as a person's occupation and their name, but after the invention of cuneiform writing, people began to record more personal details such as their chosen god, their father's name, and their title. A person's identity was tied to their seal, as it represented the most important things about them. The seal identified people and could either access or restrict entrance to certain parts of the city. People placed so much emphasis on their seals that historians have likened finding a seal to meeting a real-life resident of Uruk.

Another fascinating insight into the life of an average resident was found with the discovery of a simple piece of pottery. Beveled rim bowls dated back to the Uruk period have been found in many parts of Mesopotamia. The bowls are shallow, ugly, and extremely common. This provides evidence that the bowls were probably used to measure grain, which was used as currency before coins were invented. Since a lot of residents didn't need to farm food for their families, it is likely that they were paid with grain measured out by

these bowls. Due to the sheer amount of beveled rim bowls that have been found in ancient landfills and archaeological sites, it is reasonable to conclude that the bowls were mass-produced by workers in Uruk.

Beveled rim bowl

While the city of Uruk was massively influential, its citizens led mostly ordinary lives. However, ordinary doesn't mean boring. Their myths and legends prove that the ancient Sumerians had active imaginations and a distinct need to believe in something greater than themselves, as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* proves.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*

The epic story of Gilgamesh, a part god/part human king of Uruk, was first found by Hormuzd Rassam in 1853. The poem was inscribed on twelve tablets, but there were gaps in the story where the tablets had been damaged through the years. These gaps have been filled using other similar tablets and have been supplemented by five other poems about Gilgamesh. In these legends, Gilgamesh is portrayed as a supernatural figure who overcame godly challenges and severe trials. It is no wonder that his story endured over thousands of years, as he, no doubt, fascinated the ancient Mesopotamians.

The story states that Gilgamesh was the greatest king who ever lived since he

was blessed by the gods with traits such as courage and beauty. However, he was a harsh ruler, and his subjects cried out against him. One of the gods heard these complaints and fashioned a man named Enkidu, who would be as strong as Gilgamesh and would oppose him.

When he was released onto the world, Enkidu was wild and accepted by the animals. He soon became a nuisance, as he would steal livestock to feed on. Gilgamesh was called to solve the problem, so he sent a prostitute to seduce and tame Enkidu. The prostitute was successful and brought Enkidu to civilization, where he became a friend to the local people. In time, Gilgamesh and Enkidu faced off in battle when Enkidu tried to stop Gilgamesh from defiling a bride on her wedding night. Even though Gilgamesh won the fight, he spared Enkidu's life, and the two became friends.

Despite becoming a better person through his friendship with Enkidu, Gilgamesh became bored with the way his life was going and decided to go on a quest to gain immortality. At first, he ventured into the sacred cedar forest to cut down some of the trees, despite the fact that it was guarded by a fearful demon/monster named Humbaba. Through cunning and strength, Enkidu and Gilgamesh killed Humbaba and cut down some trees, which they fashioned into doors for the gods.

The next part of the poem explains how Gilgamesh attracted the notice of Ishtar (also known as Inanna), the goddess of love. Gilgamesh spurned her advances, so she sent a mighty monster, the bull of heaven, to kill him. Enkidu and Gilgamesh killed the bull, but this displeased the gods. Enkidu received a series of dreams warning him that the gods were unhappy with him, which offended Enkidu and led to him cursing the gods. The gods took this seriously, and Enkidu died and descended into the underworld.

Enkidu's death had a profound effect on Gilgamesh. He was grief-stricken and erected statues to his dead friend, but he was also determined to prevent his own death no matter the cost. The tablets explain that he decided to visit Utnapishtim and his wife, who had survived the great flood and were granted immortality. Gilgamesh's journey was fraught with danger, but he eventually met up with Utnapishtim. The survivor of the global flood took pity on Gilgamesh and offered him a challenge that could earn the gods' favor and result in immortality. Unfortunately, Gilgamesh lost the challenge, and despite receiving a second chance, he lost again. He had to return to the city, and he eventually died.

Carving of the Epic of Gilgamesh

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a fascinating legend that contains insight into the gods that the ancient Mesopotamians served. It also features a hero who is relatable despite his godly gifts, which might explain the enduring nature of the story. Despite all his efforts to attain immortality, Gilgamesh died like everyone else. Unfortunately, that part of the story mirrored Uruk's ultimate end.

Uruk's Fall and Legacy

During the 4th millennium BCE, Uruk was an incredibly influential city-state. It endured along with a handful of other cities while the region was ravaged by warfare and natural forces.

In time, powerful kings began to conquer large parts of the region and developed empires. While many cities fell or were absorbed by the empires, Uruk was able to hold its own. Although it never attained the same level of influence that it once enjoyed, Uruk thrived for many years. It was also subject to the limits of nature, as the soil became overworked, but the land was revived numerous times, which allowed residents to return. One of the kings of the Lagash dynasty chose to make Uruk his capital city. When the Akkadians conquered the area, they renovated Uruk since they respected the gods Anu and Inanna. The Elamites and Amorites invaded the area, and Uruk fell but was eventually revived. Uruk endured for a total of five thousand years, but it was finally abandoned for good during the Muslim conquest in 630 CE.

Thanks to numerous archaeological excavations, as well as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Uruk's legacy still endures. The city was massive and filled with temples, residential homes, and public gardens. It was a bustling and prosperous city that, like its most famous ruler, isn't alive today, but its

legend lives on.

Chapter 4 – The City of Ur

Today, the remains of the city of Ur can be found 140 miles (225 kilometers) south of Babylon and 10 miles (16 kilometers) away from a bend in the Euphrates River. The land is desolate and abandoned, but thousands of years ago, it was a respected city that experienced a period of wealth and prominence. When Ur was at its peak, it served as a port city in the Persian Gulf since the river ran much closer to the city than it does now.

This advantageous position allowed it to enjoy a bustling economy that made its elite class very rich. Excavations at the site have revealed that the residents enjoyed luxurious lives, and many of the ruling class were buried with an immense amount of wealth that proved how profitable the city once was. It wasn't always that prosperous; it likely started off as a small, unimportant village during the Ubaid period. However, by 3800 BCE, it was a force to be reckoned with and maintained a sizeable population until around 450 BCE.

Archaeological excavation at Ur

The city may also have biblical connections, as historians believe that the city was home to the patriarch Abraham before he received divine instructions to move to the land of Canaan. Such a move would have been difficult for anyone, as Ur was a city of great comforts and security. There are many interesting facets to the city's history, including kings who built the city to

new heights. Historians continue to study the site and have found incredible artifacts that shed light on what kind of life the ancient Mesopotamians led.

This chapter will explore how the city rose to prominence and the various periods that the city endured. It will also take a look at the excavations that were conducted in the area and what they revealed.

The Rise of Ur

Ur was a special city because it didn't need complex irrigation systems to become great. Its location on the banks of the Euphrates meant that the land was always well-watered and fertile. The land used to be marshy and was connected through a canal system, which was likely used as transportation at first instead of irrigation. These conditions meant that the early residents of Ur had access to reeds, birds, and fish that would have provided them with everything they needed to survive and later used to trade.

Historians have discovered that the site was occupied early during the Ubaid period, but excavating those levels has proven to be tricky, as they were covered by a significant amount of soil brought about by flooding. This shows that early residents may have struggled to stay in the area due to frequent floods, but in time, the people were able to develop a large city in the area.

The people of Ur quickly became adept at trading, and there is evidence that early in its history, the traders of the city were either directly or indirectly trading with India. Thanks to this impressive trade network, Ur enjoyed a level of wealth that other cities in the region could only dream of. As the residents became rich, they looked for ways to make life easier, and this led to a system of infrastructure, elaborate buildings, a strict social hierarchy, and intricate works of art.

Soon after World War I, Sir Leonard Wooley discovered an elaborate set of graves that he called the Great Death Pit. This find was amazing, as it gave a peek into the lives of the early residents of Ur and gave the world a clearer understanding of just how wealthy the city used to be. The excavation of the Great Death Pit drew a lot of attention from archaeologists, and it has become one of the most famous sites in Mesopotamia, thanks to the wealth of information stored there.

The Great Death Pit

The Great Death Pit contained the bodies of seventy-four bodies, all of whom were killed around the time of the death of the main occupants in the tombs. The death pit contained the bodies of several high-ranking officials as well as their attendants. It is thought that the people were servants who were buried with a prominent member of society so that they could serve their master in the afterlife. The bodies were buried with everyday objects that would have helped them in their duties, but some of the bodies were adorned with jewelry and fine clothing, which made the tomb a literal and figurative treasure trove. Wooley and his team also found musical instruments and works of art that give an insight into the culture of Ur.

During the Early Dynastic period (2900–2350 BCE), Ur became the seat of power of the Sumerian kings. This would explain the series of royal tombs that have been excavated in the area. When the kings died, they took their attendants and a chunk of their wealth with them. Kings were buried with golden weapons, shell plaques, statues, mosaics, and cylinder seals. These items proved the extent of Ur's trading network and how prosperity impacted the lives of the city's residents. It is still unclear whether or not the attendants who were buried with the prominent individuals went into the tombs

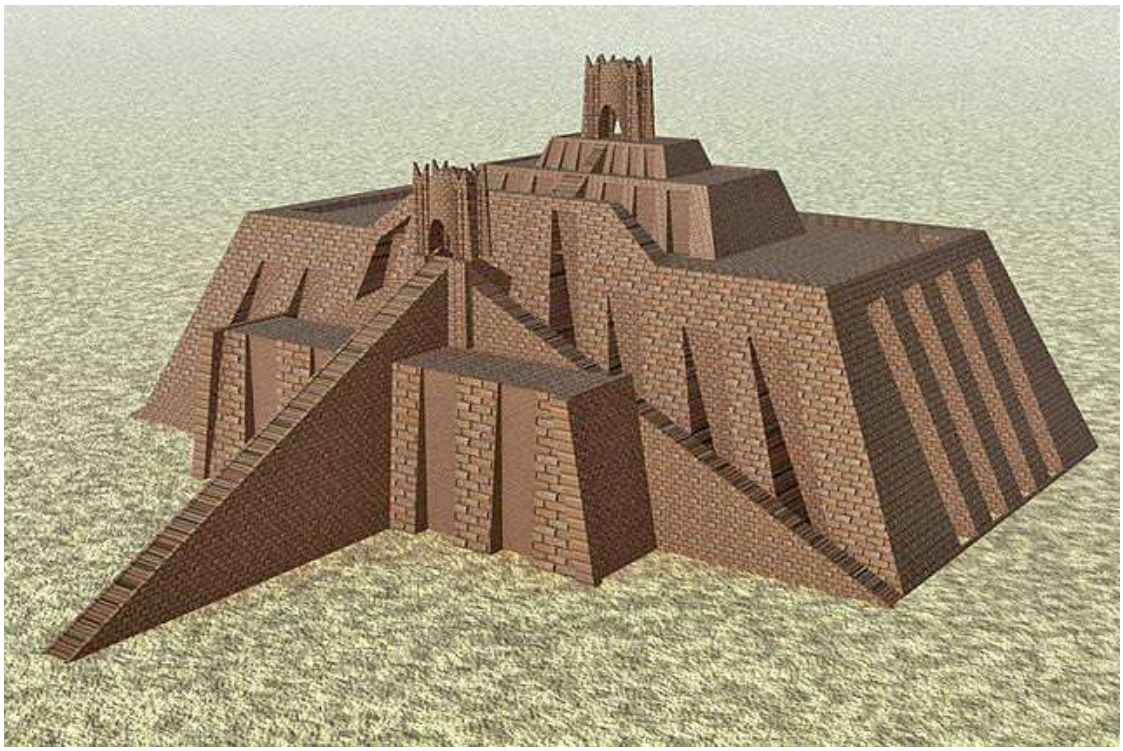
willingly or if they were forced to do so.

Since many of the tombs contained engraved plaques, archaeologists have been able to confirm the existence of figures mentioned by ancient historians. For example, various inscriptions from the time confirm the existence of King Sargon I, who was once believed to be half-human and half-god. In this way, ancient and modern historians have been able to work together, although the ancient historians favored explaining natural phenomena as the work of their gods.

Not all the residents were buried in richly decorated tombs, and historians have found clear indicators of what life was like for the ordinary residents of Ur. The population of the city was made up of farmers, slaves, doctors, scribes, and artisans. The homes of Ur were comfortable dwellings that sometimes had multiple stories and courtyards. Mansions had enough space for the family and their servants, and the occupants enjoyed luxuries such as indoor plumbing.

Gold leaf headdress taken from the Great Death Pit

Some homes contained personal shrines to their chosen gods, although bigger houses had small temples attached. As with other cities in Mesopotamia, the priestly class enjoyed a privileged position in the social hierarchy. Ur also housed an impressive structure named the Ziggurat of Ur, which was dedicated to Ur's patron god Nanna (also known as Sin, the moon god).



Computer rendering of the Ziggurat of Ur

During the early Ubaid period, Ur started out as a simple village that was likely led by a priest, but all that changed when it became prosperous and attracted the attention of other villages that expanded Ur into a city. Soon, the city was ruled by King Mesannepadda, who is identified by the *Sumerian King List*, and the city entered the First Dynasty and the age of kings.

Ur and The *Sumerian King List*

There isn't much information about the early kings of Ur, as the ancient Sumerian historians didn't find it necessary to write about the kings who didn't achieve godly status or didn't use their rule to accomplish superhuman feats, which is why many historical writings feature stories about figures such as Gilgamesh. Normal human kings simply weren't worth their time.

One king was determined not to fall into obscurity, and he ensured that ancient Mesopotamian writers would record his deeds in the centuries to come. King Sargon I of Akkad ruled over most of Mesopotamia and used propaganda to his advantage during his rule. According to the king, he was the son of a priestess and a god. He claimed that the goddess Inanna herself aided his rise to power. This strategy worked, and he ruled his lands with an iron fist. Nobody wanted to earn the ire of the gods by disrespecting their chosen ruler.

His successors followed the pattern he left behind, with his ambitious grandson, Naram-Sin, going as far as declaring himself a god. The people of Ur were impressed by this behavior, and it was during this period that Ur reached its peak, which was named the Ur III period or the Third Dynasty (2047–1750 BCE). During this time, Ur was the capital of the empire, and some of the city's most enduring monuments were built then.

The Ziggurat of Ur was constructed during this time, although it started out as a three-story temple built like a step pyramid, with a small shrine at the top dedicated to the god Nanna. Builders during this period had begun to employ complicated techniques and built domes, arches, columns, and vaults into the ziggurat. Archaeologists have noted that the ziggurat doesn't feature straight lines; rather, each wall was built with a slight curve. This was done because straight lines would have given the illusion that the walls were sagging and might have caused panic, but the curves created the impression that the walls were perfectly straight. Over time, this building technique was later reused by the Greeks when they built the Parthenon.

Tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets have been found at the site, and many of them can be dated back to the Third Dynasty. The tablets reveal many aspects of life at Ur, including business transactions and pieces of literature. While most of Ur's kings didn't become deities, they all contributed to making Ur a prominent city that enjoyed continued economic success; however, that doesn't mean that every king of Ur was ordinary. The Third Dynasty was an important time during Ur's history, and this was largely due to the influence of its two most influential kings: Ur-Nammu and Shulgi.

The Code of Ur-Nammu

Ur-Nammu rose to power in about 2047, and his rule lasted until 2030 BCE. He recognized that if he wanted to reach his goals, he needed his people to obey him implicitly. During his time, the Akkadians had been toppled from power by the Gutians. The Mesopotamians were unhappy under the rule of the Gutians, and so the king of Uruk, Utu-Hegal, decided to defeat them. According to legend, Utu-Hegal gained the favor of the gods and refused to negotiate with the Gutians. He defeated them in battle.

Although no one is quite sure what happened to Utu-Hegal, historians have found evidence that he offended Babylon in some way and that the gods apparently drowned him in retaliation. Some legends report that he drowned while overseeing the construction of a dam. It's widely believed that Utu-

Hegal appointed Ur-Nammu as the governor of Ur, and when Utu-Hegal died, Ur-Nammu seized the opportunity to become king. Although his rise to power would have been a fascinating tale, there are no concrete details about how he achieved his kingship. It's possible that he defeated Uruk in battle, but he could have also been appointed as ruler.

Ur-Nammu was likely an ambitious man and came up with a plan to keep his power and advance his people further. He emulated the great Akkadian kings and decided to follow their example. Ur-Nammu claimed to be the successor of the Akkadian kings and encouraged his subjects to see him as a father figure. With this in mind, Ur-Nammu created the world's first complete code of laws that preceded the Code of Hammurabi by at least three hundred years.

This was a genius move, as the people of Ur had grown up idolizing the legendary Akkadian kings. It was easier for the people to accept Ur-Nammu since they thought he was simply a continuation of the lineage that had brought order and wealth to the land. By using the reputation of the Akkadian kings that came before him, Ur-Nammu had the automatic respect of his people. This allowed him to pursue many of his ambitious projects.

Ur-Nammu was best known for revitalizing the Sumerian culture and economy. He built the Ziggurat of Ur, planted gardens, conquered other cities such as Eridu and Lagash, and encouraged and supported the arts. His efforts weren't just concentrated on Ur, as he developed infrastructure throughout the region of Sumer. It's clear through his code of law that he cared deeply about his people, and he took the time to build irrigation systems in other areas that made the lives of the people much better. That doesn't mean that he neglected Ur either, as he took the time to construct massive walls around the city.

His rule ushered in a time of economic stability, and he was immensely popular among his subjects. They loved him for his efforts and for his devotion to the god Enlil. This popularity is evident in the fact that he was featured in hymns and pieces of literature. According to one ancient writer, Ur-Nammu visited the netherworld, which would make him a legendary figure. Despite how closely he followed the examples of the Akkadian kings that preceded him, he never went as far as to deify himself during his reign, but his people made sure that he would be remembered for hundreds of years after he died.

Although Ur-Nammu was certainly a good king, his son, Shulgi, is known to

be the greatest king of Ur. Shulgi was determined to surpass his father's glory and went out of his way to improve on what his father had done. For example, although Ur-Nammu continued to rout the Gutians during his reign, it was Shulgi who completely drove them from the land.

Shulgi was a dynamic man who went to great lengths to prove himself. On one occasion, he ran one hundred miles from Nippur to Ur in one day so that he could be present at festivals that were happening simultaneously. He also improved his father's laws and built a massive wall along Sumer's borders to keep the invading Amorites out.

Ur-Nammu and Shulgi certainly earned their place among the great Sumerian kings, but their influence could not delay the inevitable. Despite Shulgi's efforts, the Amorites managed to breach the wall and began living among the Sumerians. Later, the city was attacked by the neighboring Elamites. All of these factors meant that when Ur fell, it took the Sumerian culture with it.

The Fall of Ur

The city didn't remain in ruins and was eventually rebuilt by later kings in the region. The kings of Isin and Larsa repaired the temples in the city, and the Assyrian rulers followed their example. Thanks to its advantageous geographical position, Ur continued to be an important city, but its best days were long gone. The dynasties that succeeded Ur made sure to honor it, as the city was important to the gods and a profitable trading hub, but it would never again be a capital city.

Although it still received occasional attention, the city fell into a long period of neglect. During the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar II, the city was rebuilt, and the last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, also took an interest in the city when he increased the size of the ziggurat. This provided a blueprint for Cyrus the Great of Assyria to follow. When he conquered the region, he realized that the best way to make his new people happy was by showing respect to their gods. Ur experienced a period of revitalization during this time and was a bustling city during the reign of Artaxerxes II.

Ur survived numerous invasions and stood while empires fell. This was an impressive feat, and it was clearly important to the ancient Mesopotamians. However, despite its religious significance, the city could only survive thanks to its position on the Euphrates. Once the Euphrates changed course, the region lost its fertility and became a desert. Without the river, the city quickly fell into ruin. Once the irrigation systems failed, people had to move on. In

the end, nature took its course, and there was nothing that anyone could do about it. The ancient Mesopotamians undoubtedly chalked up the change to the will of the gods and moved on.

Excavations at Ur and the City's Legacy

Ur's interesting history continued long after its destruction, for it became a famous archaeological site. Over the years, the ruins of Ur were covered by the desert, but in 1625 an author by the name of Pietro Della Valle noticed some stones with strange inscriptions. While traveling through the Middle East, he unwittingly stumbled upon the ancient site of Ur. The first recorded excavation was conducted by John George Taylor in 1853. When he noticed several gravesites, he theorized that it may have been a Babylonian cemetery. He probably had no idea about the wealth of information that he had uncovered.

In 1922, shortly after the First World War, a joint expedition by the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania was led by Sir Leonard Wooley, who famously discovered the Great Death Pit. The pit was the final resting place of sixteen kings and queens as well as their attendants. One of the most incredible finds in the death pit was the tomb of Queen Puabi. The female attendants in the death pit wore ribbons of silver and gold. One woman was found with her ribbon in her hands, which suggests that she passed before she was able to do her hair.

Jewelry worn by the bodies found in the Great Death Pit

Sir Wooley's discovery was made a while after Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, which influenced many of Sir Wooley's decisions. Wooley was determined to outshine Carter, and in an effort to make the site at Ur more impressive, he claimed to have found evidence of the global flood mentioned in the Bible and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. However, the evidence he claimed to have found only proved that the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers flooded regularly.

Although Sir Wooley never got the victory he wanted, the artifacts found at Ur provide historians with a record of the ages that Ur endured. There is still much to learn, and in 2009, the University of Pennsylvania and Iraq came to an agreement that would allow for further excavations at the site. The residents of Ur left behind a near-perfect snapshot of what life was like for them thousands of years ago, and that picture shows a city that was the center of trade and commerce. While the city will never again experience such luxuries, its legacy will continue to be studied through the ages.

PART TWO: The Akkadian and Assyrian Empire Cities

Chapter 5 – Akkad: A City of Politics

At one time, Akkad was one of the most important cities in all of Mesopotamia, but no one is precisely sure where the city was located. It was almost certainly built in a bend between the Tigris and Euphrates, and some historians theorize that it was located somewhere between the cities of Kish and Sippar. Due to its mysterious location, no one has been able to excavate the site to discover what exactly life was like during its prime, but thanks to the influence it had on the rest of the region, historians have a fairly accurate portrait of the city of Akkad.

Map of Mesopotamia featuring the cities of Kish and Sippar

Akkad was the capital city of the Akkadian Empire, the first multinational empire in history. It was the first empire to unite the surrounding city-states under one rule. This led to unprecedented unity, which allowed for a lot of discoveries and advancements that quickly set the example for future empires. The Akkadians ruled a large portion of Mesopotamia, and according to Sargon I, he ruled from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.

By the time the empire fell, it was made up of various cultures, including a mix of Akkadians and Sumerians, who all communicated using the Akkadian language. How were the different cultures united and kept under control? How did the illustrious city fall into such a state of disrepair that its location is still a secret?

The answers to all those questions start with a man named Sargon I.

Sargon I

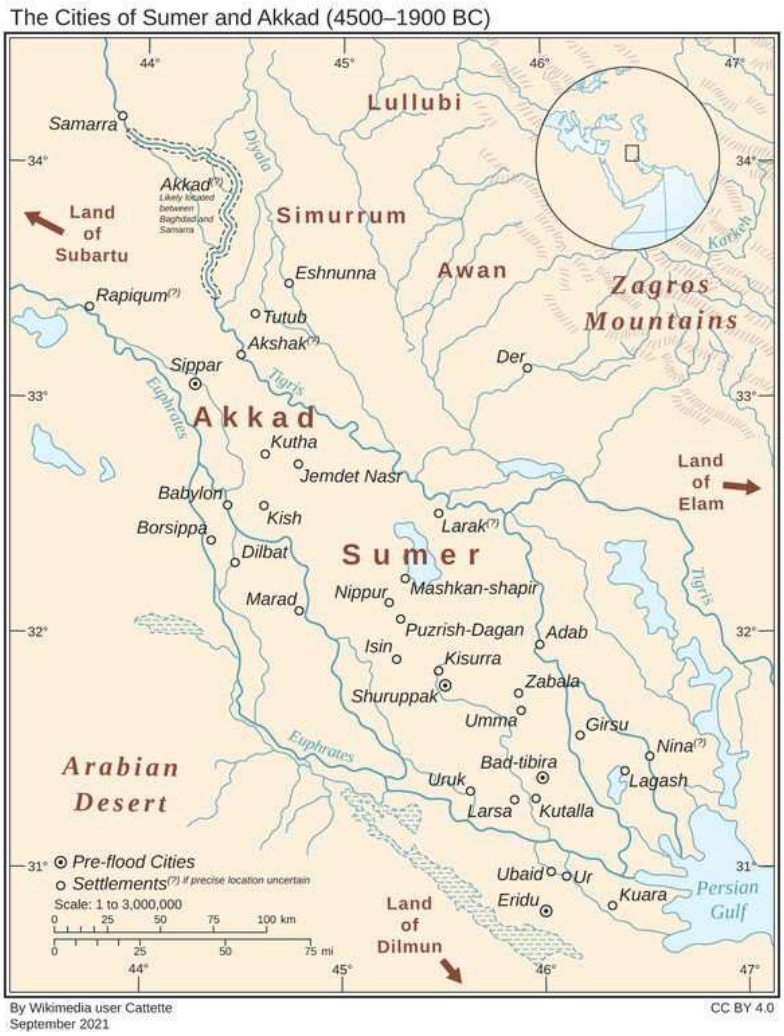
Despite his fame, not much is known about Sargon's origins. He wasn't born with the name Sargon but rather chose it for himself. The name Sargon isn't Sumerian but Semitic, which leads historians to believe that he was Semitic.

According to one legend, Sargon was birthed in secret and hidden in a basket that floated down the Euphrates and was fished out of the water by a man named Akki. As he grew older, Sargon was appointed as a cupbearer to the king. For large periods of history, the position of cupbearer to the king was seen as the highest honor, as the cupbearer was usually the king's closest advisor and confidant.

It is possible that Sargon restored the city of Akkad when he came to power around 2300 BCE, but he is widely accredited with being its founder. In Sargon's time, the king of Uruk, Lugalzagesi, had been successful in uniting many of the Sumerian cities. The common language of the time was Sumerian, and this made it somewhat easier to join the cities together. However, Sargon was a lot more ambitious than Lugalzagesi and envisioned a grander unification.

Sargon I claimed to be the son of a gardener and a priestess of the goddess Inanna. This explains why he chose the goddess Inanna as his patron and why he showed the goddess special favor all throughout his lifetime. It's possible that his position in the king's household allowed him to build the connections that he would need to overthrow the king and put himself on the throne. Once Sargon had a royal position, he began to put his dreams of multinational conquest into motion.

In time, Sargon overthrew Lugalzagesi and modeled his own empire after the work done in Sumer, but he found ways to improve on Lugalzagesi's policies. After Sumer was under control, Sargon continued his campaign in the rest of the region. He conquered the city of Elam, then moved on to Cyprus and eventually Syria and Canaan. This made him the most successful ruler of his time, and he managed to unite the region.



Map of ancient Sumer and Akkad

During his fifty-six years as emperor, Sargon encouraged the development of art, farming practices, science, and religion. His empire flourished, as it had control over extensive trade routes and fertile lands. It was a time of stability and prosperity, and Sargon kept the region under control with his impressive military.

Over time, Sargon developed successful fighting techniques that caught his enemies off-guard. Some of his tactics were used for hundreds of years and were even used by Alexander the Great. Sargon's military prowess no doubt helped escalate him to legendary heights, and he was one of the most famous figures in Mesopotamian mythology.

Sargon maintained his grip on power by building strategic fortresses and replacing the leaders of conquered cities with his own trusted advisors. For thousands of years, priests enjoyed their own distinct type of power in the

cities they lived in. However, Sargon found a way to manage the priestly class and religious orders by appointing his oldest daughter, Enheduanna, as the high priestess of Inanna, who he claimed was his patron goddess. Despite the nepotism that got her the position, Enheduanna was a capable leader and the first known author in history.

Carving of High Priestess Enheduanna

As the founder of a powerful dynasty, Sargon was a mighty warrior who enjoyed his work. He was an efficient leader who could do anything that he set his mind to. During his rule, he showed reverence to the Sumerian gods, especially Inanna, as well as Zababa, a ferocious god from Kish. Sargon also appointed himself as a priest to Anu and Enlil. This devotion likely endeared him to the Sumerians and made it easier to subjugate them.

Sargon held on to power for his entire life, even managing to crush any opponents when he was past his prime. Thanks to him, the Akkadian dynasty would last for another 150 years. Even though he left a prosperous empire to his successors, the following five emperors of Akkad would have their work cut out for them, and the empire finally fell around 2100 BCE.

Sargon's Successors

It was difficult to follow in Sargon's footsteps, and Sargon's heir and son, Rimush, had his work cut out for him. He decided that he would maintain his father's example as much as possible since it had worked for so long. However, during his early reign, he faced a lot of unrest, as many cities rebelled after Sargon's death. Rimush proved himself to the world and managed to crush many of the riots and bring the city-states back in line. There are tablets that claim that after defeating Elam, he brought most of its wealth back to Akkad for his citizens. Unfortunately, he only ruled for nine years before he was assassinated in his palace.

There were rumors that his brother, Manishtushu, had him murdered so that he could assume the throne. Whether or not this was true, Manishtushu also had to deal with widespread revolts after his coronation. As one of Sargon's sons, Manishtushu probably learned the art of warfare when he was very young and managed to stop the rebellions before they got out of hand. Despite such a rocky start to his rule, he managed to usher in a time of prosperity and improved on his father's and brother's policies.

Manishtushu was a good ruler and improved the empire during his reign. He took an interest in the trade routes that sustained the empire and expanded them until the Akkadians were trading with the countries of Magan and Meluhha, which might have been the names for parts of Sudan and Egypt. Besides trade, he also completed several large construction projects during his reign and possibly built the Ishtar temple at Nineveh.

Examples of Akkadian art

Despite all of Manishtushu's hard work, he was possibly assassinated by his own courtiers after only ruling for fifteen years.

Manishtushu was succeeded by his son, Naram-Sin, who became one of the greatest kings of the dynasty, and his successes rivaled that of Sargon I. He was also the first Akkadian king who achieved a god-like status during his reign. Like his grandfather before him, Naram-Sin became a legend and the subject of many myths.

Once Naram-Sin quelled the rebellions that broke out after his father's death, he began his long and illustrious rule. He expanded the empire's borders through conquest and brought back wealth from all the cities he defeated. Naram-Sin even waged war against Magan and defeated its powerful king (King Menes of Egypt). However, unlike his grandfather before him, Naram-Sin placed himself on the same level as the gods he worshiped and took to calling himself the "god of Agade."

Naram-Sin has the dubious honor of being the central figure of the legend "The Curse of Agade," which tells the story of a king who angers the gods and desecrates a temple before falling down dead while doing so. There is no

historical evidence that Naram-Sin did any of this, and it's possible that he was included in the story due to his fame. In fact, Naram-Sin showed great honor to the gods and was known to be a godly man. He reigned for thirty-six years and likely died from natural causes, the first Akkadian king since Sargon to do so.

Naram-Sin of Akkad

After his death, Naram-Sin was succeeded by his son, Shar-Kali-Sharri. Unfortunately, with the death of Naram-Sin, Akkad's decline had begun. As with all the previous rulers of Akkad, the people of the empire revolted as soon as the emperor died. Shar-Kali-Sharri did his best, but he was unable to

completely subdue the rebellions. During his reign, he fought against the Amorites, Elamites, and Gutians, and even though he had a few successful campaigns, he was unable to destroy them completely. Historians theorize that along with the constant warfare, Shar-Kali-Sharri also had to deal with changing weather conditions that caused severe famines.

Akkad never recovered from this, and when Shar-Kali-Sharri died, the empire descended into chaos that it would not survive.

The Akkadian Government

Since it was the first empire of its kind, Akkad set a precedent for future empires. The Akkadians had to face unique challenges when it came to governing such large territories and especially since the empire was filled with individual cultures that occasionally chafed under Akkadian rule.

The people of Mesopotamia were extremely religious, and there was no separation from religion and state. Temples were at the center of each community, but the gods that were honored at these temples were vastly different and reflected the personality of the society that served them. The Akkadian kings recognized that if they wanted to appease the people, they needed to appease the gods. Sargon managed to keep the balance between religion and government when he placed his daughter as a high priestess to Inanna. This allowed him to keep an eye on the priestly class while serving as an emperor.

Naram-Sin took a different approach when he likened himself to a god and made rebellion against him tantamount to rebellion against the gods. If the emperor could control the priests, he could control the people. The priests had direct contact with the ordinary people, and the priests had direct communication with the gods. In Mesopotamia, the word of the gods was law, and great pains were taken to keep the gods happy. Whenever something happened, whether good or bad, it was always the will of the gods, which would have been a satisfying explanation of the changeable natural phenomena to the people. In their worship of the gods, they found a way to maintain some level of control over their daily lives.

Parts of the façade at Inanna's temple

The Akkadian Empire was built through multiple strategic conquests. This type of approach could have failed because once a city had been conquered and the army moved on, the people could simply rebuild and resist when the army came back. The ruling class could also incite the citizens to riot, and they would have a fighting force that could overthrow the rule of a distant king. However, once the Akkadians defeated a city, the locals found themselves surrounded by Akkadians. Sargon began this practice by replacing the Sumerian officials with his own men who were loyal to him, and they would report back on how the city was faring.

The longer the Akkadians ruled, the more the Sumerians mixed with them until their identities were tied together. As the Akkadian Empire expanded, its influence was felt all throughout the region, and many of their practices were adopted by the locals until they became Akkadian too.

Akkadian pottery

Since Akkad was the first of its kind, it needed to come up with new solutions to fix a variety of problems. This led to the development of several systems that had never been seen before. The Akkadian kings relied on extensive systems of bureaucracy and administration, which Sargon I developed and his successors later refined. The cities that Sargon conquered all had strict social systems where the rich could get richer, but those at the bottom were often taken advantage of, which led to many small rebellions that needed to be resolved before they got out of hand. Even Sargon had to deal with frequent uprisings during his long reign.

The Akkadian rulers stationed troops in all of the conquered cities, which discouraged rebellions. Since travel took time and effort during those days, the presence of troops in the city would have kept things under control until the ruler could arrive with his main forces. They also appointed their own trusted officers as governors and had officers who commanded the troops in the cities. These measures were effective but weren't always enough to stop rebellions from breaking out. The Akkadian kings faced the constant threat of uprisings, and for over 150 years, they were successful at keeping their subjects in line. Over time, though, they lost control of their vast empire.

The Akkadian Economy

The Akkadian Empire relied largely on the farmlands in the north and south. A lot of money and effort were put into building roads that could transport the food, as well as irrigation systems that would increase productivity and result in enough food to feed the empire. Thanks to the vast fertile lands that the empire controlled, there was often a surplus of food. Unfortunately, there was a shortage of critical building materials such as timber and ore. This forced the empire to rely heavily on its extensive trade routes.

As the Akkadians built roads and trading depots, they invented new kinds of services that would make life easier for themselves as well as for the people who came after them. For large periods of time during the Akkadian Empire, there were times of peace and prosperity that allowed for increased development and innovation.

Communication flourished, and the Akkadians created a type of postal system, the first of its kind. If people wanted to communicate with each other over great distances, they could seal their message in a clay tablet with the name of the receiver, the sender, and the location engraved on it. The only way to open the tablet was by breaking it, which discouraged any kind of tampering. This new way of communicating made it easier to squash rebellions and for emperors to communicate with their governors and the commanders of their armies.

Akkadian clay tablet used for communication

As the empire took control of the region, Sargon found a way to standardize weights and measures, which was almost the same as making his subjects use the same currency. This made trade within the empire a lot easier. He also

created a fair tax system that wasn't too harsh on the lower classes and made the rich pay according to their wealth.

In the past, armies were made up of men who had been forced into fighting, but Sargon saw the value of keeping a permanent army. He had a force of dedicated soldiers whose only job was to keep the peace and fight for him. They were trained and supported by the king and were instrumental in maintaining order through the empire.

Despite continued rebellions, the innovative Akkadian kings were able to maintain a stable economy where people were taxed fairly and could usually earn enough to eat. Thanks to a bustling trade system, their homes and temples featured beautiful pieces of art made from materials they bought from the distant corners of the earth.

Akkad's Legacy

When Shar-Kali-Sharri died, the Akkadian Empire collapsed on itself and brought about a period called the "Mesopotamian Dark Ages." The empire was overrun by barbarian tribes that showed little regard for written records or farming. Over the years, the irrigation systems were no longer maintained, which led to famines and rising food prices that crippled the once flourishing economy.

It may seem that the Akkadian Empire rose up overnight, as its rise was sudden and meteoric. Unfortunately, the empire fell almost as quickly as it rose. No one can be sure about the exact causes of its fall, but it led to such a long period of instability that it's possible that Akkad was completely destroyed during that time, leaving little evidence of its existence behind. However, its legacy still endured throughout history. After the empire collapsed, the Akkadian people formed the basis for two separate empires. The first was the Assyrian Empire and then eventually Babylon.

Even though the empire collapsed, its language still endured, and so did the tales of the kings who turned it into the force that it once was.

While people continued to rebel against the Akkadian rulers, even the great kings Sargon I and Naram-Sin, they enjoyed a time of increased unification and innovation that would impact the rest of the world. Over time, the rebellions were forgotten, and people told stories about the god-kings who managed to create the first multinational empire and the city that they ruled from, Akkad.

Chapter 6 – Assur: The Old Assyrian Capital

The city of Assur sat on the banks of the Tigris River and occupied a strategic location, as it was at the center of a lucrative trade route between Mesopotamia and Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). It grew from a small village that had been established around 1900 BCE, possibly by Sargon I. Thanks to its advantageous position, it was able to grow into a major city that became the center of the Assyrian Empire.

It was named after the greatest god in the Assyrian pantheon, Ashur, and it was the god's main city. As a result, the city had incredible religious significance. Even after the seat of power was moved to the neighboring cities of Nimrud and Nineveh, Assur was still regarded as an important city. All the Assyrian kings were buried in the city, as it was viewed as their ancestral home.

The Assyrian Empire rose to great heights and pioneered war tactics that would be used for centuries to come. Their weapons and methods were highly effective, and they used these innovations to create an empire bigger than that of the Akkadians. However, the empire had a tumultuous history and eventually collapsed under its own weight. During all those times, Assur endured and rose from the rubble. It continued to enjoy an influential position throughout the empire's history, and as a result, it provides a near-perfect record of the rise, peak, and fall of a fascinating empire.

Assur during the Rise of the Assyrians

It is thought that Assur developed from an Akkadian outpost that was likely built in the same location. The city may have flourished and grown when trade between Anatolia and Mesopotamia became more frequent. The two countries developed a symbiotic trading relationship, and the cities of Assur in Mesopotamia and Karum Kanesh in Anatolia were at the forefront of this relationship.

Trade between the two countries proved to be incredibly lucrative, and the traders in Assur became rich. This allowed them to build grand personal homes and luxurious public buildings that would have made the city look spectacular. Despite its advantageous economic position, it also enjoyed a naturally defensible position. The city was built on a cliff with the Tigris flowing on both sides, which would have made it extremely difficult to capture. As it grew in influence, the kings of Assyria built massive walls to

further protect the city.

Eventually, the kings of Assur began to look beyond their own borders and conquer neighboring territories. This conquest started with King Shamshi-Adad I, who defeated the Amorites and strengthened the Assyrian borders. The time for the mighty Assyrian Empire hadn't arrived yet, as the city was conquered by Babylon around 1700 BCE. The Babylonians took over trade with Anatolia and prevented Assur from trading directly with Anatolia. Instead, Assur was forced to trade with Babylon, which severely impacted their profits. Despite this, the Babylonians treated Assur with respect, and even though it wasn't as wealthy as it once was, it didn't slip into disrepair and fall apart.

When King Hammurabi of Babylon died, the land fell into a time of instability and chaos, and Assur became subject to the kingdom of Mitanni, which once again kept the city as a vassal state. King Ashur-uballit I managed to weaken the Mitanni rule with the help of Suppiluliumas I of the Hittites, but they weren't able to completely remove the people of Mitanni. It wasn't until King Adad-nirari I, who came into power around 1200 BCE, that Mitanni was overthrown, and its lands were taken by the Assyrians.

King Adad-nirari I used the spoils of war to rebuild the city back to its former glory. He renovated the walls and rebuilt public buildings and infrastructure, and during his reign, the city of Assur was returned to its glorious state. Thanks to his efforts, the city was primed to become the influential capital city of a massive empire.

Assur during the Old Assyrian Empire

There isn't a lot of information about the earliest period of the Assyrian Empire, as historians have to rely on clay tablets left behind by merchants who recorded their trades with Anatolia. During the Old Assyrian period, the Assyrians were mostly ruled by larger and more powerful dynasties. They started off by serving Sargon I and later the Babylonians and Mitanni.

The Assyrians were still in the early stages of their development and were mostly focused on trading with Anatolia. Merchants took their wares, usually wool and textiles, to Anatolia, where they set up a trading colony in the city of Karum Kanesh, where they traded their goods for tin, metal, and silver. Thanks to this, the Assyrians became excellent at working iron and were able to develop iron weapons and armor. They would later equip their armies with the greatest weapons in the world.

Assyrian soldier's helmet

However, this would only occur over time, and during its early years, the Assyrians had to share their lands with various other nations. They faced constant threats from the Babylonians, Hittites, Amorites, Sumerians, and Mitanni, among others. The Amorites, in particular, were a problem, as they would compete with the Assyrians for much-needed natural resources. Around 1800 BCE, Assyrian King Shamshi-Adad I was able to finally defeat the Amorites. He then went on to conquer and subjugate the cities of Nineveh, Assur, and Nimrud. Along with Assur, these cities became the foundation of the empire that would eventually dominate much of the Mesopotamian region.

Thanks to King Shamshi-Adad I, the Assyrian cities were able to survive the stronger empires that conquered the region. When King Shamshi-Adad I died, Hammurabi rose to power and defeated the surrounding areas, and

Assur began its long period as a vassal state, first under the Babylonians and later under Mitanni.

This early period of Assyrian history was tumultuous, and the people would have enjoyed times of amazing wealth and prosperity that would then give way to times of instability and decline. It was not an easy time in their history, but this period formed the basis of the Assyrian Empire that later kings would use to conquer larger and larger portions of land. Without their impressive iron-working skills, the Assyrians may never have risen to prominence, and they may have been left behind by history. Instead, the Assyrians became a prominent empire that enjoyed times of prosperity that had never been seen before.

Assur during the Middle Assyrian Empire

The period of Assyrian history known as the Middle Assyrian Empire began with the rule of King Ashur-uballit, who came to power around 1350 BCE. By that time, the Assyrians were under the control of Mitanni, who were weakened by the Hittites. It was King Ashur-uballit who conquered the Mitanni people, the Hittites, and the Babylonians and established the beginnings of what would become the Assyrian Empire.

The two kings who succeeded Ashur-uballit did a good job of keeping the land that he had conquered, but it was King Adad-nirari I who finally took the initiative to expand the Assyrian borders and drive out the remaining people of Mitanni. Adad-nirari created many policies that would strengthen the Assyrian Empire, and they would be kept by his successors. One such policy involved moving skilled laborers from one part of the empire to the other. This meant that while the people were displaced and had to get to know a new way of life, their skills were put to good use, and they were less likely to create major rebellions.

Adad-nirari was able to conquer large parts of Mesopotamia, but he struggled to subdue the Hittites. During his reign, he enlarged the temple and palace at Assur, and he started building projects throughout the region that were designed to strengthen the empire.

Excavation of the ziggurat at Assur

He was succeeded by his son, Shalmaneser I, who fought hard against the Hittites and Babylonians. Many of his military campaigns were successful, but he relied on psychological warfare. For example, he spread the story that he had blinded over fourteen thousand enemies in one eye. These fear-mongering tactics would have made it easier to scare enemies into submission. In between all the wars he fought, Shalmaneser also took the time to complete building projects. He is accredited with building the city of Kalakh, which acted as a second capital city in the Assyrian Empire.

Shalmaneser was succeeded by his son, Tukulti-Ninurta, who fought successfully against his rivals. Under his rule, the Assyrian Empire was expanded and subdued its enemies. However, Tukulti-Ninurta wasn't a popular ruler since he destroyed Babylonian temples, which disgusted both his enemies and his own people. He decided to build a new capital city named Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and left Assur behind. In time, he was murdered by his sons, and the empire fell into a state of decline.

It was during this time that the region experienced what is known as the Bronze Age collapse. For some reason, likely due to drought and famine, the societies in the Near East stopped developing and began to stagnate. While

many civilizations, such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Syrians, began to fall apart, the Assyrians remained stable.

As the collapse neared its end, King Tiglath-Pileser I came to power. He was a good ruler who took the time to rebuild and expand the empire. While he set about subduing parts of Anatolia, he also constructed massive buildings in Assur, including a library for all the clay tablets he collected. He encouraged the development of art and trade, and when he died, he left behind a stable empire. Unfortunately, over time, Assyria shrank due to attacks from the Amorites and Arameans, as well as riots within its borders.

Assur during the Neo-Assyrian Empire

While the Assyrian Empire enjoyed many successes in its long history, it wasn't until 912 BCE that it experienced its peak. When King Adad-nirari II took power, he began a long series of military campaigns that resulted in the expansion of the Assyrian Empire until it controlled all of Mesopotamia, as well as parts of Egypt and Anatolia.

The Assyrian army was an impressive force, as it was equipped with iron weapons and used tactics that their enemies were completely unprepared to counter. Iron weapons were a revolutionary concept, as they were stronger than the bronze weapons used by other armies. They were also much easier to produce, which meant that the Assyrian army had a near-constant stream of new weapons to replace broken ones and arm new recruits. Countless cities and states fell to the ruthless army as it stretched its borders across the region.

Assyrian battle scene

It was during this time that the Assyrians cemented their reputation as one of the most brutal regimes in history. The army was known for being merciless and cruel, and the soldiers struck fear into the hearts of their enemies.

However, if their enemies submitted to Assyrian rule, they found that they were treated very well. Conquered cultures were assimilated into the empire, and everyone found their place.

However, the army wasn't the only factor in the Neo-Assyrian Empire's success. The kings also made politically savvy moves that would secure the future of their empire. For example, King Adad-nirari II made a point of entering into a peace treaty with Babylon that lasted for decades. This was a brilliant move on his part because Babylon and Assyria had been clashing for most of their history, but now Assyria could rely on Babylon for support when needed.

The kings who followed Adad-nirari II followed his example and went on to conquer large pieces of territory and reinforced political policies. During this time, Assur remained the capital of the empire, but during the reign of King Ashurnasirpal II, the capital was moved to the newly built city of Kalhu (also known as Nimrud).

Assur still maintained a certain level of religious importance, but during this period, a new way of worshiping its principal god, Ashur, had begun to emerge. It was believed that Ashur lived in Assur, but when the capital was moved, a new way of worshiping him had to be adopted. Instead of worshiping a local god, the Assyrians took Ashur wherever they went and claimed that he could be worshiped anywhere. They theorized that their god was omnipotent and that the gods of the people they conquered were simply different manifestations of Ashur. This made it easier to assimilate new cultures into the Assyrian Empire, and worship became more streamlined.

The Neo-Assyrian kings still spent a lot of money on Assur, as it was the home of Ashur's temple. When King Sennacherib sacked Babylon, he brought loot from the city to Assur despite the fact that his seat of power was located in Nineveh. Assur was always held in high regard by the Assyrians, but when the empire fell, its enemies did not show the city the same honor.

The Fall of Assur

The Assyrian Empire experienced its peak from around 911 BCE to 609 BCE. During that time, great and powerful kings expanded their borders and enforced policies that assimilated new cultures into their own, which led to the first true empire in history. They pioneered tactics and equipment for advanced warfare and wielded the most powerful and feared army in the world. For most of this time, the empire enjoyed a period of stability that

allowed people to develop art, science, and literature. It was a vast and impressive empire, and Assur was its crown jewel.

Assyrian glazed knob tile

The citizens of the city enjoyed status and wealth since the Assyrian kings showered the city with riches and honor. The elite of the city enjoyed an elevated status in the social hierarchy, and Assur boasted beautiful gardens, palaces, and temples. During its prime, it was certainly a sight to behold. However, the city's good fortune was linked to the Assyrian Empire. It was the Assyrians who assigned special significance to the city, and when the empire declined, so did Assur. Due to its significance to the Assyrians, it was also a target for their enemies.

After King Sennacherib was executed by his sons, his successors, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, followed his example and showed special honor to the city. They commissioned building projects and sent treasures to the city. However, after King Ashurbanipal died, the Assyrian Empire fell into disarray. Once the empire began to fall, there was nothing that anyone could do to stop it. The empire fell quickly, as its enemies attacked it mercilessly.

Assur finally fell in 612 BCE when the Medes, Persians, and Babylonians attacked and destroyed several Assyrian cities. The city lay in ruins for some time, but eventually, it was partially rebuilt, and people began to live there again. The city was still alive, but it never rose to the heights it once occupied. Assur continued to be consistently populated until the 14th century CE.

For most of its history, Assur enjoyed a position of prominence in the Assyrian Empire, but its fall was quick and decisive. While it was occupied for centuries after it fell, it was only a shadow of its former self. However, its history lay right beneath the surface, and when historians began excavating the site in the 19th century, they found a treasure trove of information about its past. As a result, its legacy lives on.

Excavations at Assur

Much like the city itself, the excavations at Assur have a fascinating history. The first excavations at the site were conducted by German archaeologists in 1903. This was a result of Kaiser Wilhelm II's fascination with history. He had visited Lebanon and found himself intrigued by the excavations taking place there. In time, universities in Berlin and the German Oriental Society sent a team led by Robert Koldewey to Babylon in 1899. Koldewey's assistant, Walter Andrae, began excavating Assur in 1903.

The excavations were extensive and strenuous, as there was a lot to uncover. However, the work came to a grinding halt in 1914.

Archaeological excavation at Assur

During these initial excavations, Andrae's team found many wonders, such as temples to Ishtar and Ashur, the walls that had been built around the city, palaces, private homes, and government buildings. Besides buildings, they also found thousands of valuable items, such as cuneiform tablets, coins, seals, jewelry, and figurines.

When the excavation stopped, Germany and the Ottoman Empire split up the archaeological finds. However, ships bound for Germany with Assur's artifacts onboard were seized by Portugal during the war. As a result, many of the artifacts were displayed in Portuguese museums until they were returned to Berlin in 1926.

Work on the artifacts found at Assur was halted for most of the 20th century, as some of the artifacts were taken to the Soviet Union, which only returned them sometime in the 1950s. Communication and collaboration between archaeologists in Western and Eastern Germany proved to be difficult due to the Berlin Wall, but once the wall fell, archaeologists embarked on the Assur Project. This involved cataloging and studying the artifacts found at Assur during the initial excavations. Thanks to the advent of technology, 3D models of ancient buildings were digitally reconstructed to give archaeologists a clear idea of how the city must have looked during its golden era.

Further excavations at Assur were conducted during the 1980s and 1990s,

which provided volumes of information that still need to be documented and released. In 2003, the site was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO due to a proposed dam project that would have flooded part of the site. It was also necessary due to the looming invasion led by the US. For some time in 2015, the site was occupied by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This was alarming because ISIL completely destroyed several key Assyrian sites, such as Khorsabad (once known as Dur-Sharrukin) and Nimrud.

In 2016, the site was retaken by Iraqi troops, and they reported that there was some damage to the city as a result of ISIL's efforts. While it's difficult to know the extent of the damage, it has been reported that the citadel was badly damaged, but several buildings, such as the arches at the entrance of the city, were largely left unscathed. Archaeologists aren't able to return to the site yet, but there are plenty of artifacts left to study that could reveal interesting insights into the city's history.

Assur's Influence and Legacy

The Assyrians oversaw a mighty empire that relied on trade and warfare to expand its borders. As a result, their culture was heavily influenced by the cultures that once ruled them and eventually the cultures that they assimilated. Warfare was a massive part of their lives, and excavations have shown that they maintained massive stables filled with warhorses and took the training of these horses very seriously.

The Assyrians also pioneered new war tactics such as siege warfare. While this form of warfare had been seen before, the Assyrians refined it down to an art. They would attack a city and lay siege to its walls with their war machines. The Assyrians would work away at the walls with a steady stream of supplies at the ready while the inhabitants of the city slowly ran out of food. Thanks to their experience with ironwork, the Assyrians perfected their iron weapons while their enemies fought with outdated bronze weapons that were harder to manufacture and handle.

Carving depicting siege warfare

That doesn’t mean that the Assyrians only focused on war. They traded extensively to bring in items such as tin and silver, which were used not only for weapons but also in their art. The Assyrians learned seal cutting from Mitanni and covered their palaces with colorful decorations. The palaces and temples in Assur would have been vibrant buildings that reflected the city’s spectacular wealth.

Besides art and war, the Assyrians prized education, and there were schools for scribes and government officials, where they would have learned Assyrian and Babylonian. They also had extensive works of literature that originated from Babylonian myths but were reworked for Assyrian audiences.

Archaeologists consider the Assyrians to be the first true empire in the world. Before them, there were smaller empires that fell almost as quickly as they rose. However, the Assyrians ruled for hundreds of years and maintained a stable influence over Mesopotamia until it was finally brought down by a coalition of Babylonians, Medes, and Persians.

During its height, the Assyrians kept accurate records on cuneiform tablets

that have proven to be invaluable to historians studying the time period. Even though the empire fell thousands of years ago, it still has a fascinating appeal. At one point, it was one of the richest cities in the world. It soared to incredible heights and eventually became a forgotten city in the desert. However, it still remains the resting place of the great Assyrian kings who conquered vast territories and commanded extensive trade routes.

Chapter 7 – The City of Nimrud

The ruins of Nimrud lie about twenty miles (thirty kilometers) south of the Iraqi city of Mosul. At one time during the period that the Assyrian Empire reigned over the Mesopotamian region, it was used as the capital city. For some reason, the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II chose to move the Assyrian seat of power from the city of Assur to the newly built city of Kalhu (or Nimrud as it became known) around 1300 BCE. While Ashurnasirpal II and his successors were still buried with their ancestors in Assur, their queens were buried in Kalhu.

Ashurnasirpal II chose a small crumbling city and used slaves to build it into a glittering city that rivaled the might and opulence of Assur. It rose to see the golden era of the Assyrian era as well as its decline. In its time, it saw several name changes and several great kings come and go. It eventually became an important trading hub and reflected the glory of the Assyrian Empire. When the Medes, Persians, and Babylonians shattered the Assyrian Empire, they chose to destroy Nimrud along with Assur, showing how powerful the city had become despite the fact that the capital had once again been changed.

In recent times, the city has received more attention since the ruins were destroyed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the site is now guarded by Iraqi forces. The city's peak was thousands of years ago, but it stood much longer than some of its contemporaries and still has an interesting story to tell.

The Rise of Nimrud

While the Assyrian capital was moved to Nimrud under the reign of Ashurnasirpal II, who ruled from 883 to 859 BCE, the city had been built much earlier by King Shalmaneser in around 1200 BCE. Before the city was built, the site was a business center that had been strategically placed on the trade route that was located near Nineveh and Assur. The city went through several name changes over the years, as it was known as Kalhu, Calah, or Caleh. The name Nimrud was applied to the site by archaeologists in the 19th century, who believed that they had stumbled upon the city mentioned in the Bible that had been built by Nimrod. If this is true, then that would mean that it was one of the first cities to be built after the Great Flood. The city of Calah is mentioned in the Bible, dating the city back to about 1400 BCE, while historians date the city back to 1272 BCE, which would mean that Nimrud

was a city of note long before Ashurnasirpal II chose it as the site of his new capital.

However, it wasn’t a major city, and it became neglected over the centuries as Assyrian kings came and went. All that changed when Ashurnasirpal II found a need to move his seat of power from the traditional capital of Assur.

When Ashurnasirpal II took the throne, he experienced a series of rebellions that threatened his rule. He was eager to prove his power, and he viciously put down any riots. Tales of his cruelty sped through the empire, which may have dissuaded any further rebellions. Ashurnasirpal II was ruthless and destroyed entire cities when he subdued the unrests, often flaying alive, burning, or impaling those who tried to overthrow him. Once his rulership was established, he began renovating the city of Assur and Nineveh, as was the custom of the kings during that period. This involved adding inscriptions of his deeds and ordering building projects in his name. As the traditional capital city of the Assyrian kings, Assur was steeped in prestige, which meant that the citizens had become proud and arrogant. This would have made it difficult to control, which may be one of the reasons that Ashurnasirpal II decided to make a drastic change. Another theory is that Ashurnasirpal II wanted to set himself apart from his predecessors. Either way, he turned his attention to the crumbling city of Kalhu.

Excavations at Nimrud

The king decreed that the city would be restored and that a palace would be constructed there. It was meant to outshine the palace at Assur and of all the kings who had come before him. To achieve this feat, the king used the labor of slaves, who had been captured during his numerous conquests. King Ashurnasirpal II was determined to change things up and make a name for himself, and his new capital at Nimrud was supposed to help him achieve that goal.

Nimrud as the Assyrian Capital

Once it became the Assyrian capital, Nimrud entered its golden age. Ashurnasirpal showered his new capital with gifts and built gardens, large public buildings, and a palace that would have been a marvel. The graves that have been uncovered at Ashurnasirpal's palace (also called the Northwest Palace) show the type of lives that the king and his courtiers led. Ashurnasirpal's queen was buried with a veritable treasure trove, which gives historians an idea of the luxurious lives that the royals led.

Ashurnasirpal didn't stop at simply building a vast palace; he also built orchards and a zoo (perhaps the first) to showcase the beautiful items that he found during his conquests. It was clear that Ashurnasirpal wanted his new

capital to outshine Assur in every possible way. Once the city was completed, Ashurnasirpal invited dignitaries from all over his empire to celebrate his new capital. The records state that almost seventy thousand people attended the festival, which lasted ten days. The guests were treated to the incredible sights in the city as well as reliefs that proclaimed his victories, which would have impressed on the whole empire what kind of person their king was.

Reliefs found at Ashurnasirpal II's palace

After Ashurnasirpal died, the city continued its role as the Assyrian capital city, but his successors added their own touches to the city. Ashurnasirpal's son, Shalmaneser III, built the ziggurat of Kalhu and a massive temple complex. During the reign of Shamshi-Adad IV, a civil war ravaged the land, but Nimrud survived the attack, and the people were able to fight off insurgents who wanted to invade the city.

Around 811 BCE, Queen Shammuramat ruled in the place of her young son until he could take the throne, and she used Nimrud as her seat of power. When her son, Adad-nirari III, began his reign, he built a new castle, and Ashurnasirpal II's palace was turned into a public government building.

Soon after this, a plague struck the city during the rule of Ashur-Dan III. The city experienced a significant loss in its population. His successor, Ashur-

nirari V, allowed the military and local officials to become more powerful than him, which led to political instability and unrest. This was a difficult time for the Assyrian Empire, and the king was eventually assassinated. The king was replaced by a usurper who went by the name of Tiglath-Pileser III.

Despite his dubious beginnings, Tiglath-Pileser III is accredited with bringing Assyria and, by extension, Nimrud out of the period of stagnation that it had languished in during the rule of Ashur-nirari V. He revitalized Nimrud by renovating the crumbling buildings and built a central palace before conquering more land for the empire. Unfortunately, Shalmaneser V did not share his father's talent for war and lost a number of military campaigns, and he was deposed by Sargon II.

Sargon II was one of the greatest kings of Assyria, and he brought the empire to its peak. While he showed Kalhu special honor, he followed Ashurnasirpal II's example and built a whole new capital for the empire. Sargon II built the city of Dur-Sharrukin (modern-day Khorsabad) and made it his capital in 706 BCE. Unfortunately, he would not get to enjoy his new city for very long, as he was killed in battle shortly after. His son, Sennacherib, moved the capital to the nearby city of Nineveh.

Life in Nimrud

Historians don't know much about Nimrud's early days, but it was certainly populated for a few hundred years before Ashurnasirpal II turned it into a capital city. Since it was located on a popular trade route, it was probably a busy business center for most of that time. However, since there was nothing significant about the city, it fell into ruin and decline.

By Ashurnasirpal's time, it was nothing more than a ruin. He recorded his efforts at Kalhu on clay tablets and noted that despite the fact that the city had been built by one of the kings who preceded him, it was nothing more than a heap of stones. As Ashurnasirpal II renovated the city, it would have attracted more citizens, especially the wealthy and elite. They would have built large houses for themselves, as well as temples and massive public buildings.

The citizens of Nimrud would have enjoyed an elevated status as well as many visitors. Thanks to the king's efforts, trade would have flourished in the city, and it would have been a center of administration and education. A temple was built to honor the god of wisdom, Ezida, and this would have attracted scholars from all over the empire. Over time, the temple developed an enviable library of literary works.

Nimrud also featured a palace that would have housed the governor. Official records were kept at the governor's palace, and it would have been a very important building during its time. The palace was richly decorated to reflect its status. Shalmaneser III was responsible for the construction of a fort in the southwest part of the city that was home to the king's riches and arsenal. It also housed official documents that have been invaluable to historians.

During this period, art became an important part of Assyrian culture. Ashurnasirpal decorated his palace with huge reliefs that featured images of the gods, successful battles, and hunting scenes. Ashurnasirpal and his people found gypsum in the area, which became the preferred material for carving reliefs and has been called "Mosul marble" in recent years. The sheer number of art and construction projects means that the city must have had a large population of artisans and skilled builders who would have created large dwellings for the local elite. Residential homes and public buildings were decorated with glazed bricks, sculptures, and decorative carvings, including the famous Nimrud ivories.

Ivory plaque found at Nimrud

After the empire's capital had been moved, the city still retained its importance and prestige and was used to govern the province. The administration continued in the city until it fell, and the city was still given special attention by the Assyrian kings, especially since most of their queens were buried in the city. When the king visited the area, he would always stay at his palace in the city, which meant that the city had to be maintained and renovated often to reflect well on the king.

While the quality of life in the city would have depended greatly on a person's social standing, it was still an impressive place filled with palaces,

temples, gardens, and the first zoo of its kind, which would have been a cause for boasting for any citizen.

The Fall of Nimrud

The city experienced its peak while it served as the empire's capital. During those times, it would have been at the center of the king's life and been the site of many celebrations and festivals. When the king returned from a successful military campaign, he would usually bring vast amounts of loot that would be lavished on the city. And when a king rose to power, it was his duty to add his own personal touches to the capital, which would have resulted in numerous building projects. Along with the king, courtiers and trusted advisors would have flooded the city and built their own lavish homes.

Nimrud would have been extremely busy with all these visitors, and the locals would have benefited from this hustle and bustle. However, it also would have been subject to revolts and attacks from the kings' enemies. During these times, it was fiercely defended, and the citizens would have been protected. After the capital was moved, the city's prestige was somewhat diminished, but it was not neglected. Sargon II and his successors all paid special respect to Nimrud and Assur. While Assur held special significance to the Assyrians, Nimrud eventually became its rival in wealth and splendor, which was exactly what Ashurnasirpal II had hoped for.

However, after King Ashurbanipal died, the Assyrian Empire quickly began to fall apart. In 612 BCE, Assyria's enemies conquered large parts of the empire. As the Medes, Persians, and Babylonians marched against Assyria, they destroyed anything that stood in their way. Unfortunately, that included Assyria's most prominent cities. In one year, Assur, Nineveh, and Nimrud were all burned to the ground. As buildings collapsed, they preserved evidence of Assyria's might and wealth, which would be discovered by historians hundreds of years later.

The city was never rebuilt after its destruction, but small communities seemed to have lived among the rubble for some time. Eventually, sand covered the ruins, and by the time the Greeks visited the land, they marched right over the ancient city, completely unaware of its existence.

Excavations at Nimrud

In 1820 CE, a representative of the British East India Company wrote about some mysterious markings at a specific site in the desert. The representative,

Claudius James Rich, probably had no idea what he had uncovered. In time, an archaeologist named Austen Henry Layard read Rich's description and realized that he had probably discovered something of historical value. As a result, excavations started at Kalhu in 1845, almost 1,250 years after its destruction at the hands of Assyria's enemies.

Layard worked alongside noted Assyriologist Hormuzd Rassam, and together, they uncovered Ashurnasirpal II's palace as well as multiple temples. This was an incredible find, as up until that time, most of what people knew about Assyria had been taken from the biblical account. At Nimrud, they found Assyrian art, cuneiform tablets, and grand buildings that would have offered never-before-seen insights into the lives of the ancient Assyrians.

Unfortunately, Layard and his associates weren't completely aware of what they had discovered and assumed that they had discovered the city of Nineveh. In 1849, he published a book entitled *Nineveh and its Remains*. This captured the public's attention due to Nineveh's notorious reputation, and the book quickly sold out. The book generated a lot of interest in Assyrian history, as it was seen as a way to better understand the Old Testament in the Bible. Archaeologists began investigating the surrounding areas, and it was quickly discovered that Layard had uncovered Nimrud and not Nineveh.

In 1855, Layard and Rassam gave control of the site to William K. Loftus, who continued the excavation. It was during this time that the Nimrud ivories were discovered, as well as numerous other valuable items that provided evidence of the city's incredible wealth. Most of the Assyrian art that is displayed in museums were uncovered from Nimrud during excavations that lasted up until the 1960s.

In 1877, Rassam returned to work at Nimrud, but he only stayed for three more years before the site was left for another sixty years. In 1949, an excavation was conducted by a team led by Max Mallowan. It was during this time that they uncovered the Nimrud letters, which were actual correspondences between Tiglath-Pileser II, Shalmaneser V, and Sargon II, which were stored in the Northwest Palace. The excavation work continued until 1963, but smaller excavations were conducted by the Directorate of Antiquities of the Republic of Iraq and archaeologists from the University of Warsaw. Between the years 1974 and 1976, the entire site was photographed. An architect also recorded the city's plan, which helped to reconstruct some of the reliefs. In 1988, the tombs of four ancient Assyrian queens were

discovered. Work at the site revealed entire statues and remarkably preserved artifacts that can now be studied and displayed in museums.

Reliefs found at Ashurnasirpal II's palace in the British Museum

The reliefs that once adorned Ashurnasirpal II's palace are now on display in the British Museum, while the Nimrud ivories often go on tour in the United States of America, Great Britain, and Iraq.

Nimrud's Legacy

The city of Nimrud started off as a small provincial city that stood on one of the most popular trade routes of its time. Eventually, it fell into ruin and was forgotten until one of Assyria's great kings decided that he would restore the city and build his capital there. As a result, Nimrud enjoyed the type of prestige that most cities in history rarely saw. It was the home of several of the greatest kings of the Assyrian Empire and was the burial place of their queens. Massive amounts of treasure were stored there, and the empire's most talented artisans worked tirelessly to churn out massive artworks, including statues, reliefs, and delicate ivory pieces that are still considered fine art in modern times.

Nimrud was the site of great scholarly advances thanks to the massive temple

of the god of wisdom, which attracted the best scholars in the known world. While it served as the capital, it would have been the center of political policies put in place by the kings. When the capital was moved, it became an administrative capital that stored correspondences from the kings of the time that can still be studied today. Nimrud received a special place of honor as one of the greatest cities in an empire that ruled Mesopotamia and the surrounding areas. The palaces, temples, and government buildings would have glittered with glazed bricks and shown impressive scenes from some of the most exciting battles of the time.

Thanks to its proximity to the Tigris River, there would have been plenty of food, and traders would have brought luxury items from all over the known world. It is no wonder that historians discovered a treasure trove of artifacts in its ruins. For hundreds of years, those treasures were hidden and preserved by desert sands. During that time, invading armies marched over untold riches, but when the site was discovered, it once again attracted the attention of scholars from all over the world. It became a great source of pride to many Iraqis, as it provided insight into one of the greatest empires in history. Archaeologists are still studying the artifacts discovered during the numerous excavations that took place at the site. Many more artifacts are still buried in the desert, and historians believe that they can find even more valuable information in the ruins, but excavations have been halted due to unrest in the area.

Unfortunately, in 2015, the site was almost completely destroyed by ISIL. In mid-2014, the site was overrun by ISIL forces, and they made it clear that they would not leave the site untouched. They were true to their word, and they took sledgehammers, explosives, and bulldozers to the ancient city. This was due to the fact that ISIL views the Assyrian culture as idolatrous, and they have vowed to destroy it all. The ziggurat was systematically demolished, and UNESCO declared the destruction of the site to be a war crime. Around the same time, video footage of the destruction taken by ISIL members was posted online.

In late 2016, the site was reclaimed by Iraqi forces, who reported that 90 percent of the city had been destroyed. The ziggurat had been completely leveled, and Ashurnasirpal II’s palace was almost gone, with only a few walls remaining.

In 2020, the Nimrud Rescue Project was put into action, with trained archaeologists training new Iraqi archaeologists on how to preserve the site.

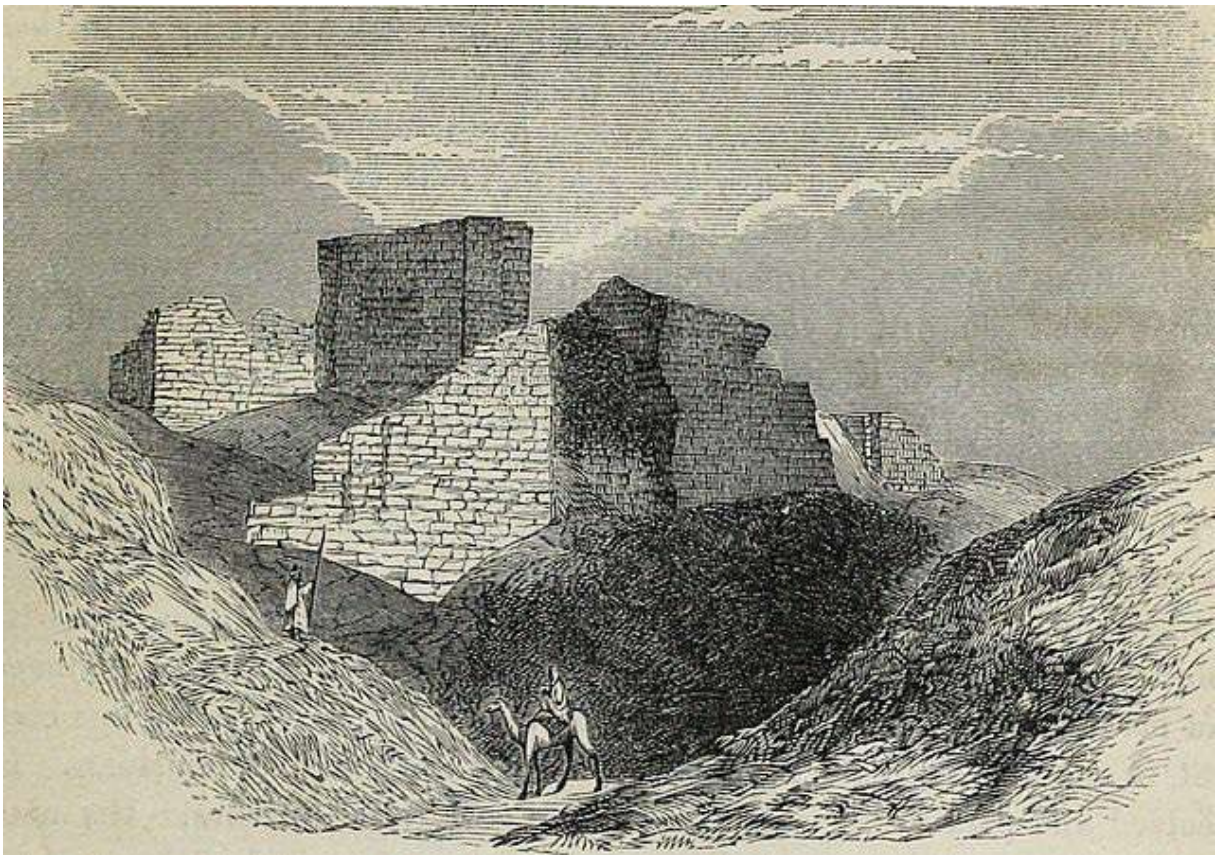
There are plans to restore the city and turn it into a tourist destination, but this will still take years of work. The city is currently guarded by the Nineveh Plain Protection Units.

Despite the wanton destruction at the site, the legend of Nimrud still lives on. While the damage impacted archaeological excavations, there is still a lot of work that can be done at the site, and more artifacts are probably preserved in the sand, protected from the surface. Nimrud was destroyed several times during its long history, but it still has a lot to share about the times it endured.

Chapter 8 – Nineveh: Sin City

The site of the ancient city of Nineveh is now located on the outskirts of the modern-day city of Mosul in Iraq. The site faces the dangers of encroaching suburbs and vandalism from those who would like to sell its treasures for a profit. There was a time when it was one of the oldest and most respected cities in the most powerful empire in the world.

Nineveh was located on the banks of the Khawsar River, which lies east of the Tigris River. Its proximity to these rivers made the land fertile, and in time, it became a stop on one of the most profitable trade routes in the area. The city was heavily involved in the worship of the goddess Ishtar, who was one of the more famous gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon. Eventually, the city was favored by King Sennacherib and experienced a surge in popularity, which, along with its prestige as a religious center, meant that the city was able to endure longer than most.



Drawing of the ruins of Nineveh

The city quickly gained a reputation as the “City of Bloodshed,” and it was both feared and respected throughout the known world. Nineveh endured for

thousands of years and is older than the Assyrian Empire it once adorned, but it fell when the Assyrians were defeated. By the time archaeologists uncovered it in the 1800s, it had a fascinating story to tell.

Nineveh in the Old Assyrian Empire

Nineveh was older than most of its contemporaries, as it was built around 6000 BCE, likely by the Hatti people. Unfortunately, this early version of Nineveh (its original name is unknown) suffered a series of earthquakes since it was built on a fault line. It was conquered by the Akkadian king Sargon the Great, and the city became a center of worship of the goddess Ishtar, who had a cult in the area. This may have given the city some importance, which would have prevented it from being destroyed during subsequent years.

Ishtar evolved from the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who was the goddess of fertility and war. Her worship became so popular that other goddesses in the area became part of her identity, and in time, she came to be known as the Queen of the Universe, sharing powers with gods such as Enlil, Enki, and Anu. Ishtar was a contradictory goddess, and she was eventually afforded more and more powers. Her role as the protector of prostitutes and alehouses may have aided her rise to popularity, and her cult may have used temple prostitution in her worship. She was incredibly popular in Mesopotamia, which explained why when the Akkadians were defeated, her city escaped the warfare virtually unscathed.

Carving of Ishtar

Sargon the Great may have built the first official temple to Ishtar in the city, which would have cemented its place as a center of worship to the goddess. This would have endeared him to his citizens and drawn more people to the city. The city would have been kept busy by trade and a regular influx of worshipers, who would have come to pay homage to their goddess. The priesthood would have flourished during this time, and the temple was likely one of the busiest parts of the city. The temple was destroyed by an earthquake around 2260 but was quickly rebuilt by King Manishtushu.

After the Akkadian Empire fell, the city was taken by the Hatti, but they were conquered by the Amorites. The Amorites renovated the temple and recorded

their construction projects in the city. Power changed hands quickly during this time in Mesopotamian history, which would have led to a lot of instability. The city may have survived during these times, which is more than what can be said about some of its neighbors, but it wouldn't have been able to flourish during this period. When the Assyrians rose to power, Shamshi-Adad I took the city from the Amorites, and it quickly benefited from the empire's vast trading network. It was during this time that the city began to gain prosperity and influence. The Assyrians brought stability with them, and their culture became prominent. Rebellions were quickly squashed, and the local populace was quickly brought to submission, which may have caused some chafing. However, there wasn't much that anyone could do once the Assyrians took over.

The city still hadn't reached its peak, and when Shamshi-Adad I died, the region was once again overrun by the Amorites. For some time, it was ruled by King Hammurabi of Babylon. It would have served as a vassal state during this time and would have had to pay homage to Babylon and follow Hammurabi's code of laws. This was beneficial, as it brought order and unification to his empire. As with several other Assyrian cities, Hammurabi didn't treat the city with disrespect, but it wasn't allowed to gain too much wealth or power.

Nineveh in the Middle Assyrian Empire

After the death of Hammurabi, Mitanni took over the region, and the city became a vassal. Assyria retook the city under the rule of King Adasi, but there was a struggle between the Assyrians and the Mitanni people until King Adad-nirari I established the Assyrian Empire more firmly. During this time, the region experienced a time of stability and prosperity, which would eventually lead to the city's golden age in the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Under the rule of the Assyrian kings, the city became a busy trading hub and one of the key Assyrian cities. When the nearby city of Kalhu was built by Shalmaneser I, he also gave special attention to Nineveh. He ordered the construction of a new palace and temple in the city. Along with the new building projects, the city was renovated and fortified, and it's possible that Shalmaneser built Nineveh's first walls.

During the Middle Assyrian Empire, the city was caught in near-constant conflicts between Hatti, Mitanni, the Hittites, and Assyria. The Assyrian kings felt the need to construct more buildings in Nineveh to make it

stronger, and the city served as a provincial city, which means that important correspondences would have been stored there. The Assyrians pioneered new administrative policies that allowed them to maintain their large empire. Every city would have had a part to play in this administration, and Nineveh was no different.

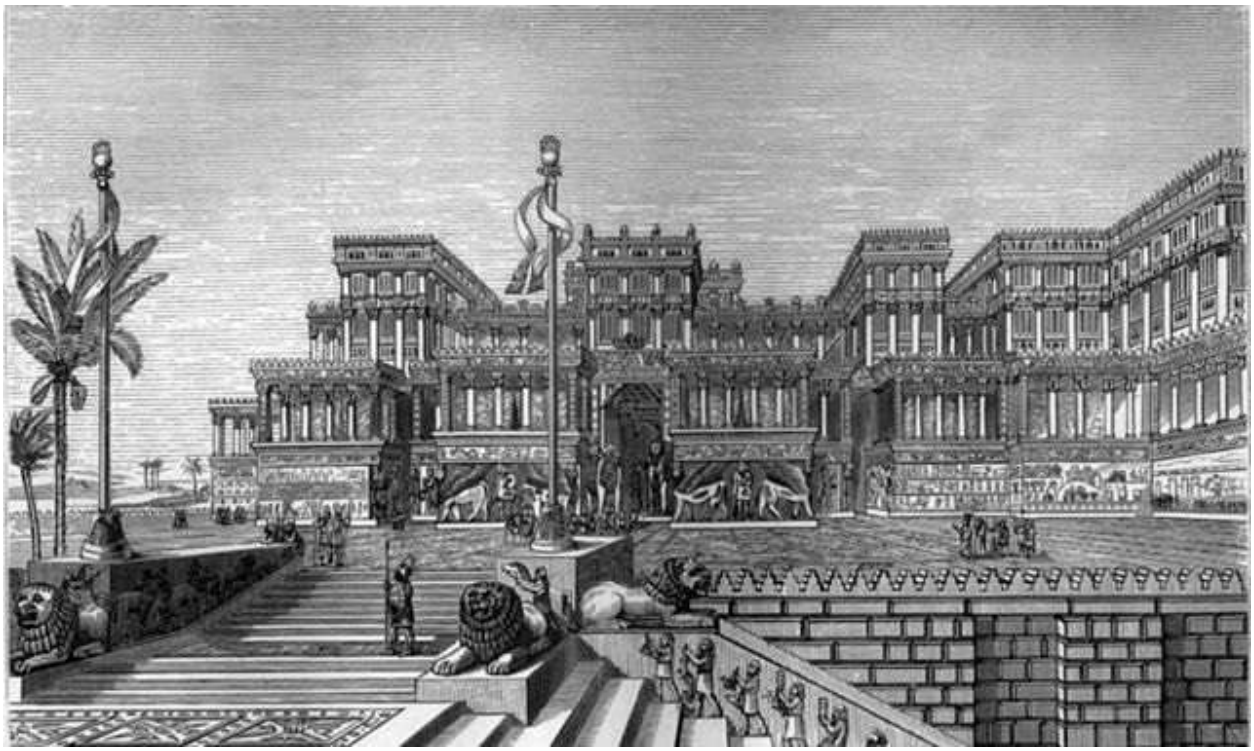
Besides the temple to Ishtar, several other temples were built for other deities, which would have established its position as a religious city. Despite its religious significance, the city wasn't incredibly important to the Assyrians. That distinction still belonged to the capital city of Assur and later Kalhu, but it was quickly becoming a power in its own right that the Assyrians didn't want to lose to their enemies. It wasn't until the Neo-Assyrian Empire that Nineveh experienced an increase in significance and entered its golden age.

Nineveh in the Neo-Assyrian Empire

During the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Nineveh became one of the most famous (or infamous) cities in the world. King Sargon II was a great warrior king who rose to mythical heights of fame and was probably one of the greatest Assyrian kings. During his reign, he built his own city named Dur-Sharrukin that would serve as his capital. Unfortunately for Sargon II, he died in battle, and his body was lost to his enemies shortly after he finished his capital city.

While Sargon II was an impressive king, his son, Sennacherib, wanted nothing to do with his father and moved the capital from Dur-Sharrukin to Nineveh. This meant that the city almost immediately swelled in size, and Sennacherib raised it to new heights. Sennacherib turned the provincial city into a city that was fit for the king's seat of power. He went about building gardens, stronger walls, parks, canals, and his very own palace. Sennacherib turned it into one of the most beautiful cities of the ancient world.

He focused on infrastructure and built aqueducts that brought fresh water into the city. The water was meant not only for consumption but also to maintain the gardens that he had built. Sargon II declared that his palace in Dur-Sharrukin was "without rival," but Sennacherib was determined to outdo his father's efforts. He took everything he could from Dur-Sharrukin and moved it to his own capital. His palace was huge, with eighty rooms, giant statues, and reliefs, as well as some of the most beautiful gardens in the world. There were bronze columns that were perched on the backs of bronze animals, which would have made the palace an impressive sight to behold.



Sennacherib's palace

Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon succeeded the throne and put a lot of effort into his building projects in Nineveh, which would have made the city even more impressive. A new palace was constructed under the reign of Ashurbanipal, who had a special interest in written works. He quickly set about building a library with a catalog of every piece of literature in Mesopotamia. At its height, Ashurbanipal's library featured over thirty thousand inscribed tablets. These efforts made Nineveh a city of education and culture. Scholars from all over the world lived in the city, and soon, the city was at the forefront of innovation.

During its peak, Nineveh was one of the most beautiful cities in the world, but the Assyrian Empire wasn't very popular. Once Ashurbanipal died, there was a power vacuum, and his sons fought for control. Assyria's enemies pounced, and the empire quickly fell, taking Nineveh with it.

Life in Nineveh

During its time as Assyria's capital, the city experienced its peak. Reports state that during this time, it would have taken a person three days to cross the city by foot. The city was decorated with massive stone reliefs that would have featured brightly colored scenes of legendary battles, among other things. The area was very fertile thanks to its location, which meant that there

were plenty of fruit orchards and olive groves.

The city featured waterways that could be used for transport and trade, and boats made from reeds and bitumen were a popular way to travel the rivers. There were also many overland routes that allowed people to travel by foot, donkey, or wagon. Along the way, citizens ran inns and food stalls that travelers and traders could use along their journey.

The walls of the city had eighteen different gates and protected the city from invaders. Even the walls were decorated, and they featured statues carved from alabaster. Although they would have been an impressive sight, these statues were supposed to ward off evil. Sennacherib's palace watched over the city from its elevated position. It would have been a focal point of the city, and it was made from limestone covered with white plaster and glazed bricks that would have made for a striking image.

Perhaps one of the most stunning features of the city were the gardens that featured exotic plants and animals brought from all over the natural world. The gardens were maintained thanks to a well-planned irrigation system, one of the first of its kind.

Reliefs of Nineveh's gardens

As a religious center, the city featured a tremendous ziggurat that was open only to the priesthood and the Temple of Ishtar. During Nineveh's height, the temple was already ancient and probably a source of immense pride. The temple was richly decorated with glazed bricks, carved reliefs, and multiple gold and silver decorations.

Nineveh was a trading city, which meant that all sorts of wonders were sold at its markets, as well as the products made by local Assyrian artisans. Lavish feasts and festivals were the norm, and the king would celebrate one of his military victories or host a hunt to prove his strength to his citizens. During

these hunts, the king would track lions on his battle chariot while crowds watched from beside the hunting grounds. There were also regular theater shows to entertain the masses that featured reenactments from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and other popular legends of the time.

Religious festivals were a source of delight for locals, as it was a time when they got to see evidence of their gods for themselves. Priests would arrange religious processions through the city that would have featured colorful sights and music. Fresh beer, honey cakes, and bread were provided for the general populace during this time, which would have made the festivals unmissable events.

Victory parades were almost just as popular as religious festivals but were undoubtedly more brutal spectacles. Whenever a king returned from a successful military campaign, he would parade through the streets with the spoils of war. Often, severed heads would be hung on top of the city walls as a warning to dissenters and other enemies of the empire.

The city was incredibly prosperous during its golden age, and this was reflected in the lives of the elite who made a home there. The rich regularly hosted banquets that featured luxurious foods such as ox, sheep, deer, pigeons, and other delicacies. Foods were imported from all over the world, and foods such as dates, sweets, honey cakes, and exotic fruits were common sights in the city.

While the citizens of Nineveh enjoyed the beautiful scenery and culture, it was also a brutal place where order was maintained through harsh punishments. Criminals were often impaled, and the empire had many enemies, which meant the city’s walls were often adorned with severed heads. Many people loved and revered the city, but Assyria’s enemies hated it. And when the opportunity arose, they did not hold back from laying waste to the empire and its beloved city.

Nineveh’s Legacy

Nineveh was an ancient city that saw the rise and fall of several dynasties. For much of its history, it had little power or influence, but it was a steady provincial city that survived several wars and conquests. That doesn’t mean that Nineveh was forgotten or neglected. As the site of the Temple of Ishtar, a goddess who was renowned in all of Mesopotamia, the city would have received a special measure of attention from whoever happened to be ruling the region at the time. This is evidenced by the spectacular treasures found at

the site, including the intricately carved statue of an Akkadian king.

Bronze carving of Sargon of Akkad

During its golden age, the city became the site of impressive palaces built by kings who were eager to show their might to their citizens and set themselves apart from the great kings who had come before them. It also featured one of the most impressive libraries in the world, which was built by the last great king of the Assyrian Empire. Unfortunately, a little over a decade after the death of Ashurbanipal, the city was completely destroyed by its enemies.

A force made out of Medes, Persians, and Babylonians marched on the city in 612 BCE. Historians have found conclusive evidence that the city was razed to the ground. The extent of the damage proves that Assyria's enemies wanted to leave no trace of the Assyrians behind. Nothing was allowed to remain, and the city was burned to the ground. As massive buildings collapsed, they trapped and sealed vast amounts of evidence of the Assyrians' once-powerful empire.

After the city was completely destroyed, the region was divided between the Persians, Babylonians, and Medes. For some time after the battle, the ruins were sporadically populated by small communities, but it was never rebuilt, and eventually, it was buried by the desert sands. However, its reputation lived on, as it was described as the "City of Bloodshed" in the Bible and was the focal point of the Prophet Jonah's assignment, a prophet who is highly regarded by both Christians and Muslims.

For hundreds of years, the city of Nineveh lay forgotten in the Iraqi desert. It was first excavated in 1846 CE by Austin Henry Layard. This began a long

series of excavations in the area by several different teams. Over the decades, the exact size and importance of the city were brought to light, which gave historians a clearer picture of the once glittering city. There are two mounds at the site, the Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus mounds. Nebi Yunus means “Prophet Jonah” and is a protected site due to the Islamic shrine dedicated to the prophet.

Unfortunately, the mounds are in danger from the creeping suburbs of Mosul and acts of vandalism from criminals who pillage the site and sell the artifacts for a profit.

When Assyria was conquered by the Medes, Persians, and Babylonians, they set out to erase Assyria from history. Many of their conquests were motivated by revenge due to the ruthlessness of the Assyrian army, but their work simply buried a time capsule attesting to the strength of the empire, which ensured that it would be remembered and studied by future generations.

PART THREE: The Rise and Fall of Babylon

Chapter 9 – Babylon and Hammurabi

Mesopotamia was the home of the first city and the first empire. Over its rich and storied history, it saw the rise and fall of numerous dynasties, but one empire stood apart from the rest. It is perhaps the most famous and influential of all the Mesopotamian empires: Babylon. Its power stretched to all four corners of the known world. It was a phenomenal world power that unified numerous cultures and brought order to a region that had become war-torn and neglected. At the center of it all was the city of Babylon, after which the empire had been named. The city lies about fifty-three miles (eighty-five kilometers) away from the modern city of Baghdad in Iraq, and it still receives thousands of visitors a year.

Ruins of Babylon

The city has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it is the most famous of all the Mesopotamian cities. For hundreds of years, it was a center of trade, education, and art. Its famous hanging gardens are known as one of the wonders of the ancient world, and the city would have drawn people from all over the known world. During its prime, it served as the capital of one of the most dynamic empires in history. The story of Babylon started long

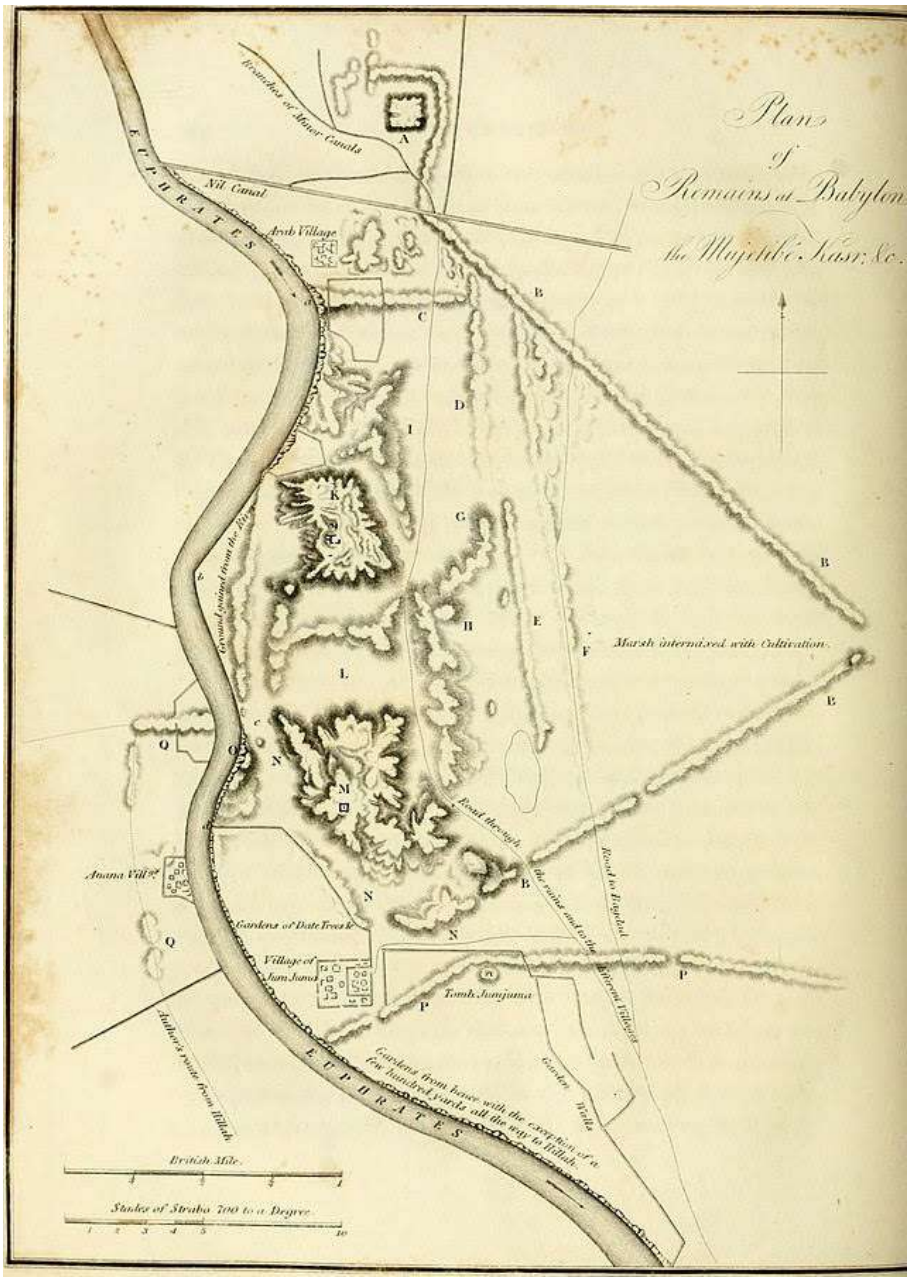
before it became the center of a world power, but its influence started with a king named Hammurabi, who would leave behind a legacy that still impacts the modern world.

Old Babylon

The ancient city of Babylon was built along the banks of the Euphrates River, which changed course over the years and washed away a lot of evidence from the Old Babylonian period. The Neo-Babylonian era also saw a lot of renovation and rebuilding projects that may have destroyed a lot of artifacts from the older period as well. In addition, the city was overrun by foreign powers on numerous occasions, and its enemies sacked the city as they went, which led to the destruction of early records about the city. All these factors mean that the earliest periods of Babylonian history have been lost to time, but thanks to the diligent efforts of archaeologists, a clear picture of Babylon's early days has been formed.

The name of the city may have come from an Akkadian word at the time that meant "Gate of the Gods," which alludes to Babylon's status as a religious city. For some time, Akkadian was the most popular language in Mesopotamia, and many cultures used the Akkadian script and language in their everyday lives. This included the Amorites, who were a nomadic tribe of warriors. For a long time, the Amorites simply conquered lands, as they needed grazing fields for their herds, but eventually, the Amorites started settling down and building cities. Toward the end of 2000 BCE, the last Sumerian dynasty fell, which led to a power vacuum in the region. Mesopotamia fell into a period of chaos and warfare, which led to a steady decline for most of the cities in the area. The Amorites took advantage of this situation and quickly began ruling large parts of the Mesopotamian region, including Babylon.

The Amorites chose Babylon as their capital city and began sacking neighboring cities. For some time, the Amorites had been little more than nuisances that more powerful kings had no problem subduing. However, as the Sumerian dynasty declined, the Sumerian kings found that the Amorites had become an uncontrollable force that weakened an already failing system. In a last-ditch attempt to stem the flood of invading Amorites, the kings built a wall between the Tigris and Euphrates. The Amorites simply found a way around the wall and mingled with the existing populations. There was no way to stop them from pouring into the region.



Map of the ruins of Babylon

By 1900 BCE, the Amorites were well established in the area, and they used Babylon as their base as they attacked neighboring towns and cities. The Amorites came to be known as the first Babylonians, and their rule lasted until 1600 BCE, a period that has come to be known as the Old Babylonian period. During this time, the Amorites went from minor pests to a massive military power, and their kings helped Babylon become one of the most significant cities in history.

The Amorites weren't the only military power in the region, and they

experienced near-constant conflicts from their neighbors, but in time, they crushed their enemies and became a powerful but brief empire under the rule of one of the greatest Babylonian kings: Hammurabi.

Hammurabi's Rise to Power

Not much is known about Hammurabi's early life, but he left behind a lasting legacy that ensured that he is remembered as the greatest of the Amorite kings. Under his rule, Babylon became the center of an empire and started its journey as one of the most important cities in Mesopotamia. Hammurabi succeeded his father, Sin-Muballit, to the throne around 1792 BCE. During the first years of his reign, he was busy with numerous construction projects, which included setting up irrigation systems, building temples and city walls, and generally establishing his rule in the region. During the first years of his reign, the southern part of the kingdom was conquered by King Rim-Sin of the neighboring kingdom of Larsa. This would be the beginning of the long-lived rivalry between Hammurabi and Rim-Sin.

Statue of Hammurabi

The Amorite kings had discovered that if they could control the Euphrates, they would be able to control much of the region, but this led to major conflicts with Larsa and other cities that existed on the banks of the Euphrates. The river was an essential part of daily life in that part of Mesopotamia, as most of the agriculture in the area depended on the water for irrigation. Hammurabi shared this goal, and by 1787 BCE, he had conquered the cities of Uruk and Isin, which led to a series of battles against Rim-Sin. Eventually, a truce was agreed upon between the cities of Babylon, Larsa, Eshnunna, Mari, and Ashur. During this time, Hammurabi took advantage of this peace to strengthen the cities under his control.

Hammurabi is known as one of the great kings of Mesopotamia, and many of his successors tried to follow his example closely. Records dated from his reign show that he was a thoughtful king who was actively involved in ruling his kingdom. He took care of his subjects and was very concerned about justice and order. During his rule, science, religion, and art prospered, and the city became a center of learning and culture.

Although several kings before him tried to unify the region, Hammurabi was able to achieve unification on a grand scale. While it's unclear whether or not Hammurabi simply wanted to unify the Mesopotamians or simply wanted to expand his empire, he managed to do something that no one else had been able to do. Unlike the kings who came before him, Hammurabi wasn't interested in turning himself into a god, but he did give himself the title of "the king who made the four quarters of the earth obedient."

This title shows that Hammurabi was primarily concerned with control, and this trait is seen throughout the rest of his reign. Hammurabi made sure that he was involved in every part of ruling and developed an extensive set of laws that focused on justice. For some time, the Code of Hammurabi was seen as the earliest set of laws, but earlier laws have been found, although none were as substantial or encompassing as Hammurabi's laws. Regardless of whether or not Hammurabi's code was the earliest set of laws, it was surely one of his greatest accomplishments.

Hammurabi and His Code

The Code of Hammurabi was discovered by archaeologists in 1901 CE, and they were blown away by what they found. For years after its discovery, the Code of Hammurabi was credited with being the oldest set of complete laws, with Hammurabi given the honor of being one of the wisest and most just of

the Mesopotamian kings. In later years, earlier codes were discovered, and it became recognized that Hammurabi may have drawn many of his laws from accepted traditions in the area.

While his laws may not have been entirely original, Hammurabi saw the benefit of recording laws and setting definite punishments for certain crimes. This made it easier to rule and unify the area. It may have also helped to bring peace to a region that had experienced over a century of near-constant warfare. Hammurabi had his laws recorded on a stele, which is a tall finger-shaped piece of stone. This particular stele is known as the Stele of Hammurabi and can be viewed at the Louvre Museum in France.

Stele of Hammurabi

Hammurabi didn't take credit for the laws and claimed that he was given the code by Shamash, who was the Babylonian god of justice. The top of the code shows a picture of Hammurabi receiving the code from Shamash, with bolts of lightning emanating from the seated god. The god is pictured as having a measuring rod in his hands, which may have symbolized his role in

commerce. The laws were carved in cuneiform and would have held a place of honor in Babylon before it was sacked and looted.

Carving of the god Shamash

The code includes 282 laws, which were all written in the form of legal precedents and featured the “eye for an eye” principle. This meant that if someone committed a crime, then they would receive a specific punishment. These laws prevented people from taking justice into their own hands and deciding the punishments for themselves. Many of the punishments were quite harsh, but it also claimed that a person was innocent until they were proven guilty.

Hammurabi’s code featured laws that affected almost every aspect of ordinary life, from professional to family. However, the penalties for crimes differed according to a person’s station in life. The elite, freedmen, and slaves all experienced different degrees of justice. For example, a doctor would have to charge different rates depending on a person’s social standing; slaves and freedmen would receive medical treatment at a cheaper rate. This was one of

the kinder laws, but oftentimes, the higher classes could get away with minor punishments if they injured someone from a lower class.

Some of the laws were reasonable and would have made life easier for the lower classes, but many of the laws featured gruesome punishments that would have ensured obedience among the general population. The law of retribution was practiced, which meant that if a man injured a fellow man, he would have to be injured in the same way. Capital crimes featured their own unique punishments; for example, the penalty for incest was being burned alive. It also featured a principle called “trial by ordeal.” If a crime could not be proven, a man’s guilt or innocence would be determined. The accused would be put in a life-threatening situation, and if they survived, then it meant that they were innocent, and the accuser would be put to death. However, if the accused died, then the accuser would receive a reward.

While some of Hammurabi’s laws don’t make sense to modern readers, his code provided the basis for many law codes that were developed later. It also helped Hammurabi to rule an empire that was built out of many different cultures and people. While he succeeded in raising Babylon to new heights, his influence would not prevent the empire from falling after his death.

The Death of Hammurabi

While the majority of Hammurabi’s rule was marked by peace and prosperity, the last fourteen years were a time of unrest and war. He had to fight against enemies in Ashur, Eshnunna, and Elam. Around 1763 BCE, he took action against his longtime rival Rim-Sin of Larsa. There are few reports about what took place, but historians theorize that Hammurabi used Babylon’s position on the Euphrates to dam the river. This would have provided Hammurabi with control over the Euphrates, and it would have been disastrous for Larsa, as Babylon held a naturally advantageous position on the Euphrates while Larsa was downstream and relied heavily on the water from the river. All Hammurabi had to do was build a dam to contain the water. From there, he could decide if he wanted to release the water, which would result in flooding, or hold onto the water and watch Larsa wither up.

Hammurabi finally defeated Rim-Sin after a siege that lasted for a few months. Over the next few years, Hammurabi fought against his enemies in the east, and he even fought against the king of Mari, who used to be his ally. These wars weren’t well-documented, and the reason for all the fighting has been lost to history. During this time, Hammurabi took hold of large portions

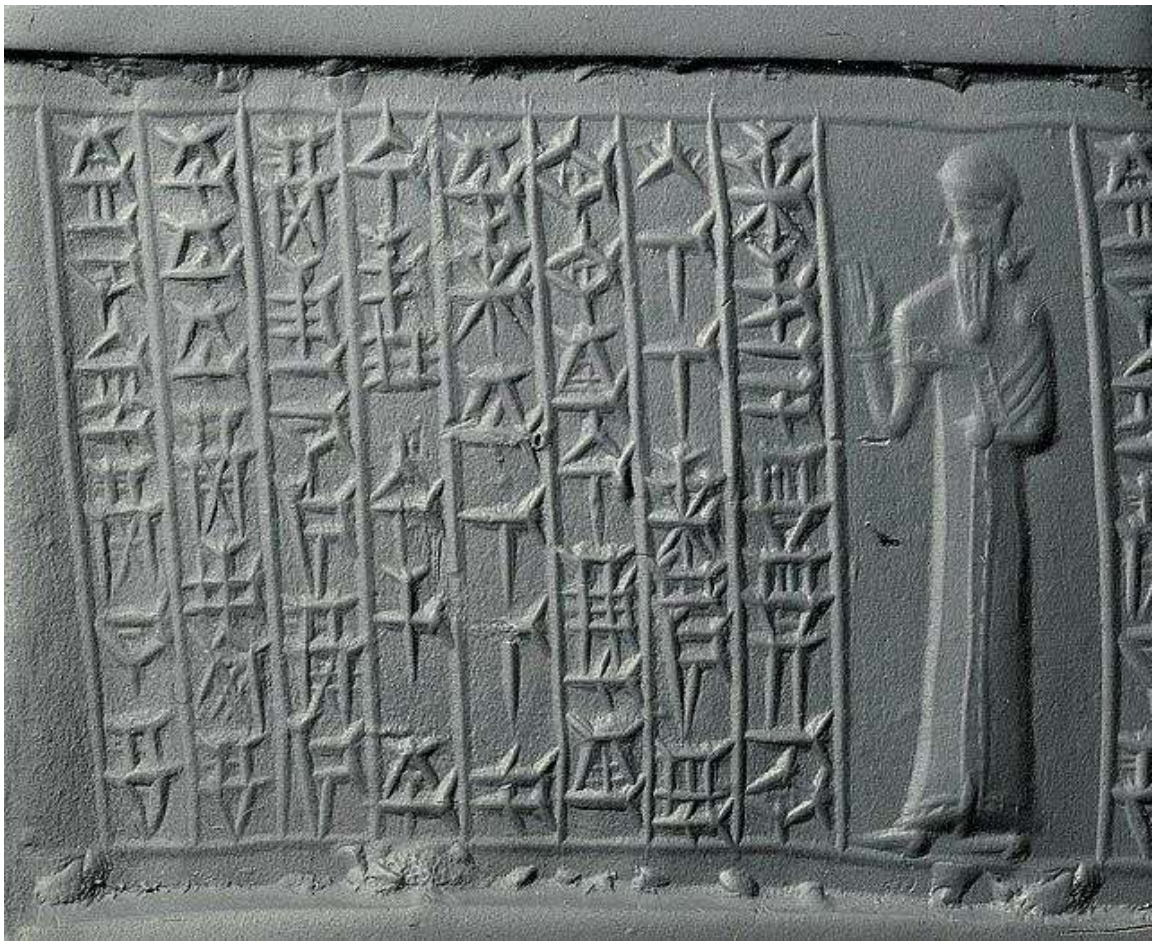
of Mesopotamia and turned Babylon into a true empire. Around 1757 BCE, he turned his attention to Eshnunna and defeated the city. Unfortunately, Eshnunna was the only thing holding back more enemies from the east. For the rest of his life, Hammurabi had to defend his empire from a constant stream of warriors who were intent on taking over Babylon.

During this time, Hammurabi's son, Samsuiluna, had to take over many of Hammurabi's duties because he had become too old and sick to keep up with everything. While Hammurabi was a strong and capable leader, he was very controlling and hadn't implemented many systems that could be continued after his death. Records from his rule show that he was personally involved in the intimate details of his empire and oversaw many of the policies that he enacted. During his lifetime, he turned Babylon from one of many city-states into a powerful empire that conquered most of Mesopotamia. To achieve this, Hammurabi had to make many unique and large-scale changes to the way Babylon had been ruled in the past.

These policies ensured that the empire ran smoothly, and Hammurabi made sure that he was involved as much as possible. His people benefited from his care, and Babylon became a massive city that was the home of scholars and artisans from all over the known world. The entire empire was unified under his code of laws, which was probably developed using real-life legal cases. However, Hammurabi was a domineering ruler, and he didn't set up a tenable administrative system that would ensure that his empire continued after his death. In 1750 BCE, Hammurabi died and left his heir, Samsuiluna, a mighty empire that couldn't be sustained.

Babylon after Hammurabi

Samsuiluna had to deal with many challenges during his rule, including several uprisings that started with the news of his father's death. For a few years, he was able to successfully hold back many of Babylon's enemies, but he wasn't able to completely squash the rebellions, and there were soon more enemies than Babylon could handle. Around 1595 BCE, the Hittites conquered Babylon, and the Kassites took control over the region. During this time, Babylon was allowed to operate in a diminished capacity but was kept firmly under Kassite control.



Kassite cylinder seal

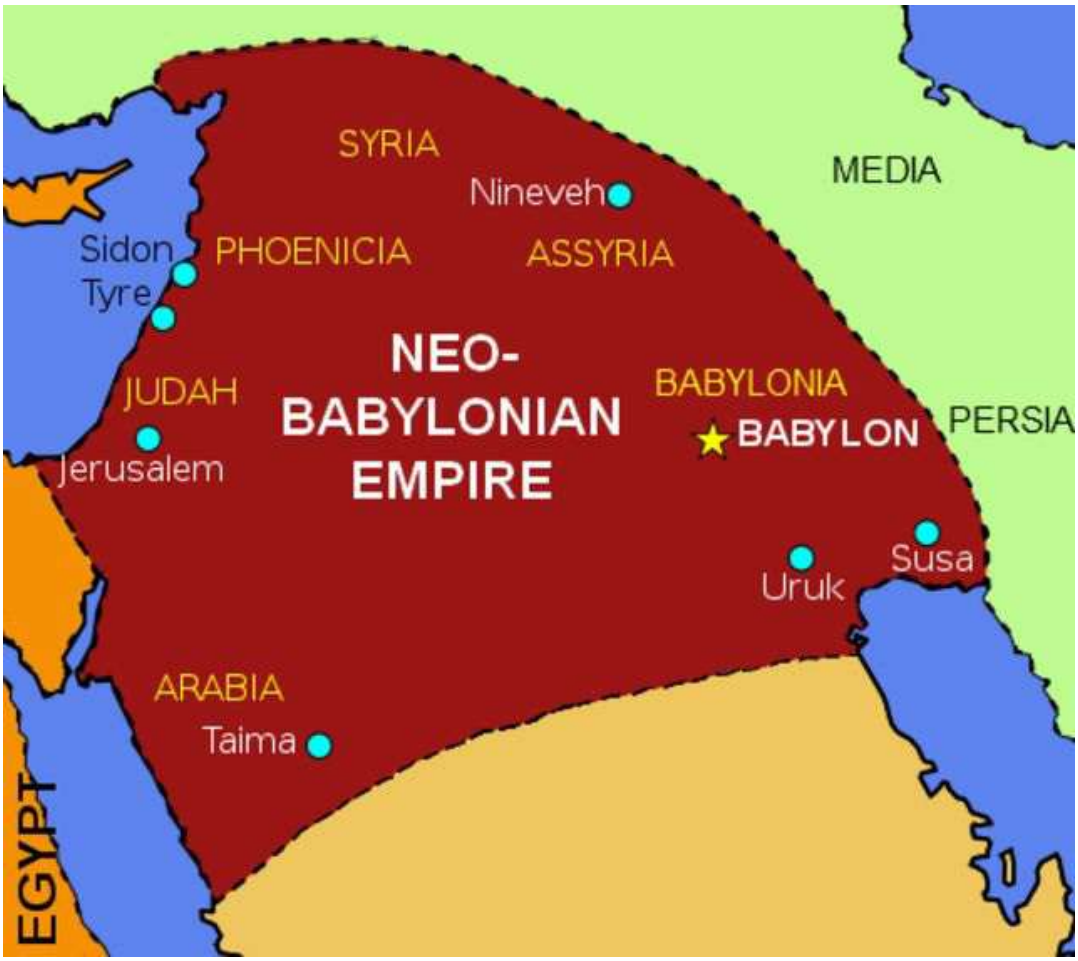
The Kassites weren't harsh rulers, and for some time, literature and art flourished in Babylon. One of the most famous works of Babylonian literature, the Enuma Elish, was developed during this time. Eventually, the Elamites conquered the Kassites and, by extension, Babylon too. The Assyrians became an empire in their own right and fought against the Elamites and Kassites on numerous occasions. For centuries, Babylon endured under the rule of other stronger powers, and for a time, it may have seemed that its best days were long past. However, the story of Babylon did not end with Hammurabi; in fact, the city had not even entered its golden age yet.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire had yet to rise, and it would once again ensure Babylon's position as the capital city of one of the greatest empires in history. The kings of this new version of the Babylonian empire would build the city to glittering new heights and leave a lasting mark on the Mesopotamian landscape.

However, none of that would have been possible without the blueprint that Hammurabi and the Old Babylonian Empire left behind. Hammurabi's code continued to be used in the region long after his death, and even his enemies found benefits in using the code in their justice systems. It was practical for its time, and it would have been useful in controlling the diverse cultures that occupied the area. For centuries, the code was used to train scribes, as they were tasked with making copies of the code to ensure that it would be remembered. Historians believe that when the Elamites sacked Babylon, they took the stele with all the laws on it back home as a war prize. It is thought that it was kept on display in the Elamite kingdom. In time, the stele was lost, and Hammurabi's code was replaced by newer codes, but eventually, the code was rediscovered. Now, hundreds of years after the fall of Babylon, Hammurabi's legacy continues to be studied by modern scholars.

Chapter 10 – The Neo-Babylonian Empire

Hammurabi's death marked the beginning of the end for his empire. Within a short period of time, the Babylonians were overrun by their enemies, and Babylon was ruled by foreign kings for hundreds of years. During those years, Babylon once again became a small city-state that had to obey whichever dynasty was ruling at the time. The Assyrians ruled over Babylon for most of that time, but the Babylonians tried to break away from the Assyrian Empire a few times. The great Assyrian kings managed to subdue the unrest in Babylon, but as the Assyrian Empire began to weaken, more and more territories fought against them and declared their independence.



Map of the Neo-Babylonian Empire

After the death of the last powerful Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, Babylon quickly broke away from the declining empire and became an independent, albeit small, kingdom for the first time in hundreds of years. This set the foundation for the Neo-Babylonian Empire, a short-lived but influential

empire that would conquer a larger territory than Hammurabi could ever manage. The empire would be ruled by powerful kings such as Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar II, and Nabonidus. The Neo-Babylonian Empire ushered in a time of economic prosperity, and the city became a hub of culture, architecture, art, and science. The height of the Neo-Babylonian Empire was one of the most important periods in Mesopotamian history.

The Fall of Assyria and the Rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire

The Assyrian Empire lasted for over three hundred years, and during that time, it conquered most of Mesopotamia, including the Babylonians. Their success as an empire relied largely on their army and military might. The Assyrians ruled with an iron fist, but their rule could often be harsh, and their war tactics were terrifying to their enemies. The Assyrians were widely feared and hated, which meant that when the Assyrian Empire began to decline after the death of Ashurbanipal, its enemies didn't hesitate to strike back.

During its long history, the Assyrian kings almost always had to subdue rebellions and unrest when they started their reign. Most of the territories under Assyrian rule wanted to be independent states again, which meant that whenever they sensed a shift in power within Assyria, they tried their best to shake Assyria's rule once and for all. Most of the time, the Assyrian kings managed to settle the unrest. The punishment for rebellion against the Assyrian Empire was severe, and the Assyrians became adept at cutting off prisoners' body parts and made a practice of burning small children alive. However, everything changed when the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, died. His successor, Sinsharushkin, was unable to subdue the rebellions, and Babylon became an independent kingdom under the rule of Nabopolassar in 626 BCE.

For hundreds of years, Babylon had endured under Assyrian rule. During that time, Babylon caused numerous problems for the Assyrians. They frequently rebelled and sided with Assyria's enemies, but the city was revered as a religious and cultural hub, which meant that every time it was sacked by Assyria, it was simply rebuilt. The city was immensely important to the ancient Mesopotamians and even to the Assyrians, as it was closely linked to the Assyrian city of Assur. Assyria and Babylon had a long and complicated history. When Tukulti-Ninurta I looted the city and desecrated its temples, his own people revolted against him, and he was assassinated shortly after.

Babylon came close to asserting its independence around 705 BCE after the death of Sargon II, the great warrior king of Assyria. At that time, Sargon II's son, Sennacherib, took the throne. During those days, it was customary for the new king to visit Babylon to take part in a religious ceremony involving Babylon's patron god Marduk. Sennacherib decided not to attend the ceremony, which signified to the Babylonians that he was a weak king. They did not waste any time. A local chieftain who had been defeated by Sargon II, Merodach-Baladan, announced that he was the new king of Babylon. Sennacherib responded by sending one of his military officials to defeat the would-be king. Babylon, along with its allies, the Elamites and Arameans, quickly defeated that force, but Assyria's dealings with Babylon were far from over.

Over the course of his reign, Sennacherib had to fight against Babylon on several occasions, and the constant struggle between the two led to the death of Sennacherib's son, Ashur-nadin-shumi. In 689 BCE, Sennacherib marched on Babylon and completely destroyed the city. He then had a statue of the god Marduk taken to Nineveh as a trophy of his victory. Since the Assyrians and Babylonians both worshiped some of the same gods, this was seen as a terrible insult to both the Babylonians and Assyrians. Sennacherib was assassinated shortly after, and historians agree that his assassination was directly linked to the desecration of Babylon.

Carving of Marduk

Babylon was rebuilt, but it had to bide its time under Assyrian rule. By the time Sinsharushkin took the throne, Babylon was on the precipice of freedom. Under Nabopolassar, the city gained independence. A little over a decade later, he marched on Nineveh with a coalition of Medes and Persians. Sinsharushkin was killed in the three-month-long battle, and his successor, Ashur-uballit II, was defeated soon after. When the Assyrian Empire fell, the Neo-Babylonian Empire began to rise.

King Nabopolassar

Not much is known about King Nabopolassar's early years, but it is thought that he was connected to a powerful family that came from Uruk. He started

out as a general who fought against the Assyrians after Ashurbanipal's death. When the Assyrian Empire fell, there was a lot of confusion about who would rule and what would happen next, as the Assyrians had been ruling for a long time. Nabopolassar no doubt took advantage of that confusion and used it to become the king of Babylon.

Cylinder mentioning King Nabopolassar

Unlike his predecessors, Nabopolassar was successful and was crowned the king of Babylon in 626 BCE. Because of this, Nabopolassar is known as the founder of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the first king of the Chaldean dynasty. It would take another decade before Nabopolassar completed his conquest against the Assyrians. Nabopolassar made treaties with surrounding nations, including the Elamites, Medes, and Persians. In 614 BCE, the Medes fought against Assur and struck a terrible blow against the crumbling Assyrian Empire.

Nabopolassar must have sensed his opportunity because he quickly launched a campaign against Assyria along with his allies. This campaign culminated in the Battle of Nineveh in 612 BCE. This grueling and decisive battle lasted for three months. The fighting was fierce, as Nineveh was Assyria's beloved capital and one of its most important cities, as well as the site of King Sinsharushkin's final stand. The Babylonians, along with the Medes and Persians, defeated Sinsharushkin at Nineveh. They completely destroyed the city and several other key Assyrian cities, and Nabopolassar was left with an empire that stretched from Egypt to the Persian Gulf.

While Assyria's cities were being conquered, they were also looted and sacked by the invading forces. The Medes, in particular, were known for

being brutal and made a habit of desecrating temples, which disgusted the Babylonians. While Nabopolassar was accredited with saving the Babylonians, the destruction of several revered temples would have earned him the people's ire. However, he claimed that his military campaigns had been commissioned by the god Marduk. This would have cemented his reputation as a pious king, and it would have endeared him to the Babylonians.

Despite the clear victory at Nineveh, the Assyrians continued to be a problem during the rest of Nabopolassar's reign. When Nineveh was destroyed, King Ashur-uballit II moved the Assyrian capital to Harran, but he later had to move it to Carchemish when the Babylonians captured Harran. When the Babylonian forces marched on Carchemish, Ashur-uballit II called on a powerful ally: King Necho II of Egypt. Nabopolassar took his army and his son, Nebuchadnezzar II, with him to Carchemish. The Babylonians won the battle in 605 BCE, and Nabopolassar died that same year.

Drawing of the Battle of Carchemish

During his twenty-year reign, Nabopolassar was not only able to gain Babylon's independence, but he was also able to set the foundation for a powerful empire, which was something that none of the Babylonian kings

since Hammurabi were able to do. Thanks to his efforts, Nebuchadnezzar II inherited a kingdom that was primed to take over most of Mesopotamia.

King Nebuchadnezzar II

Nebuchadnezzar II was the greatest of the Chaldean kings and is known for being an accomplished warrior as well as a patron of the arts and architecture. He began his military career at a young age, and cuneiform inscriptions from Nabopolassar's reign mention that Nebuchadnezzar was involved in the construction of a temple dedicated to Marduk. During the last years of Nabopolassar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar fought alongside his father against the Assyrians and is accredited with the victory against the Egyptians and Assyrians at Carchemish.

King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon

When Nabopolassar died in 605 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar wasted no time in taking control of the throne, and unlike the Assyrian kings before him, he

didn’t need to spend months or years trying to subdue rebellions. He returned home quickly after his father’s death, took the throne, and before the month was over, he was able to return to his army. Over the next few years, he expanded his empire so that its bordered stretched past Syria and Palestine. During those years, he conquered several states, including Judah and Ashkelon. However, around 600 BCE, he fought against the Egyptians and lost, which resulted in the loss of some of his hard-earned territories. Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon and spent his time rebuilding his army and fortifying his cities.

It wasn’t long before he returned to Palestine and reclaimed the territories he had lost, including Judah. He also faced threats from the Elamites but was able to deal with those effectively and continued his conquests in Syria. Like the Assyrians before him, Nebuchadnezzar would force certain citizens from conquered cities to parts of the empire where their skills were needed, and he would replace rulers of fallen cities with his own trusted personnel.

Nebuchadnezzar claimed to be a descendant of the great Akkadian King Naram-Sin, and he also branded himself as a spokesperson for the god Marduk. Nebuchadnezzar is probably one of the most famous Mesopotamian kings in history due to his appearance in biblical texts. These texts give information about some of his later military conquests, including his battles against Jerusalem and Tyre.

While Nebuchadnezzar was undoubtedly a gifted warrior, he also enacted policies of diplomacy, and he spent a lot of time reconstructing Babylon. He was also very focused on rebuilding Babylon back to the heights it occupied during the Old Babylonian Empire. During his rule, he commissioned the building of numerous wonders that Babylon became known for, including the Ishtar Gate and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Due to his influence, there was a resurgence of Sumero-Akkadian art styles and the development of new art techniques. Nebuchadnezzar showered Babylon with attention and money, as he was determined to make it the most beautiful city in the world. Thanks to ancient literary works and excavations at Babylon, historians believe that he achieved his goal and that Babylon became the most affluent city in the world.

Artist's rendering of Nebuchadnezzar II's army

During Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Babylon was portrayed as the center of the world and housed incredible pieces of art that would have impressed visitors. The city became a hub of commerce and education, and it was remarkably tolerant of foreign gods, which would have made it easier for immigrants in the city. Women also enjoyed increased freedoms, and there were multiple schools that focused on the advancement of science, literacy, and mathematics.

Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BCE in his beloved city, having achieved all his goals. He left behind a capital city that was considered to be the center of the world and an empire that enjoyed peace and economic stability. King Nebuchadnezzar II was undoubtedly the greatest of the Chaldean kings, and while that was an impressive achievement, it also meant that everyone who came after him would fall short of his impressive legacy.

Nebuchadnezzar II's Successors

Nebuchadnezzar II was succeeded by his son, Evil-Merodach (or Amel-Marduk), in 562 BCE. Evil-Merodach is mentioned in the Bible when he freed King Jehoiachin of Judah and gave him special treatment. Despite inheriting a stable and prosperous empire, Evil-Merodach would only reign for two years before being assassinated by a courtier named Neriglissar. The reasons for his assassination are unclear, but there are some hints that Evil-

Merodach had considered reversing some of his father's policies. Since Nebuchadnezzar II was such a popular king, this may not have been such a good idea. Neriglissar was an influential courtier who had married into the royal family and had accompanied Nebuchadnezzar II on some of his military campaigns.

By the time Neriglissar ascended to the throne, he was already an old man, and his reign would be short-lived. He died in 556 BCE, and his young son, Labashi-Marduk, succeeded him to the throne. Labashi-Marduk is known as a child king, but there is some evidence that he may have been a young adult when he inherited the throne. Unfortunately for the young king, he also would not reign for long, and after a few months, he was assassinated for reasons that remain unclear. The *Uruk King List* claims that he ruled for about three months, but it may have been shorter. Some historians theorize that Labashi-Marduk may have been murdered because he wasn't part of Nebuchadnezzar's lineage. While his father married one of Nebuchadnezzar II's daughters, Labashi-Marduk's mother may have been one of Neriglissar's other wives. The Babylonians may have been outraged because of Labashi-Marduk's lineage, and it is plausible that this would have led to his assassination.

There isn't much information about Labashi-Marduk, but some ancient texts claim that the young king had gotten involved in "evil ways," and some mention that he hadn't learned the proper way to be a king. While the reasons for his assassination have been lost to history, the fact remains that he was killed in the palace and quickly replaced by a man named Nabonidus. This was the fourth time that the kingship had changed hands in less than a decade. Surprisingly, Babylon remained stable during this period. The changing rulers didn't seem to have much of an impact on the empire as a whole, but the royal instability was not a good sign.

Nabonidus was known for being an unusual king who spent vast amounts of time away from the capital and left the duties of government to his son Belshazzar. He also angered the priests of Babylon when he neglected the festivals of Marduk in favor of the god Sin, who was the god of the moon. Historians think that Nabonidus's mother was a priestess of Sin, which may explain why he deviated from the traditional worship of Marduk.

Carving of moon worship in Babylon

His worship of Sin (also known as Nanna, the moon god) also may have resulted in his decade-long stay in Tayma, an oasis in Arabia. Historians aren't completely sure why the king stayed away from Babylon for so long, and there are multiple theories that include madness or spiritual enlightenment. In any case, Nabonidus returned just in time for the Persian conquest, which would spell the end of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

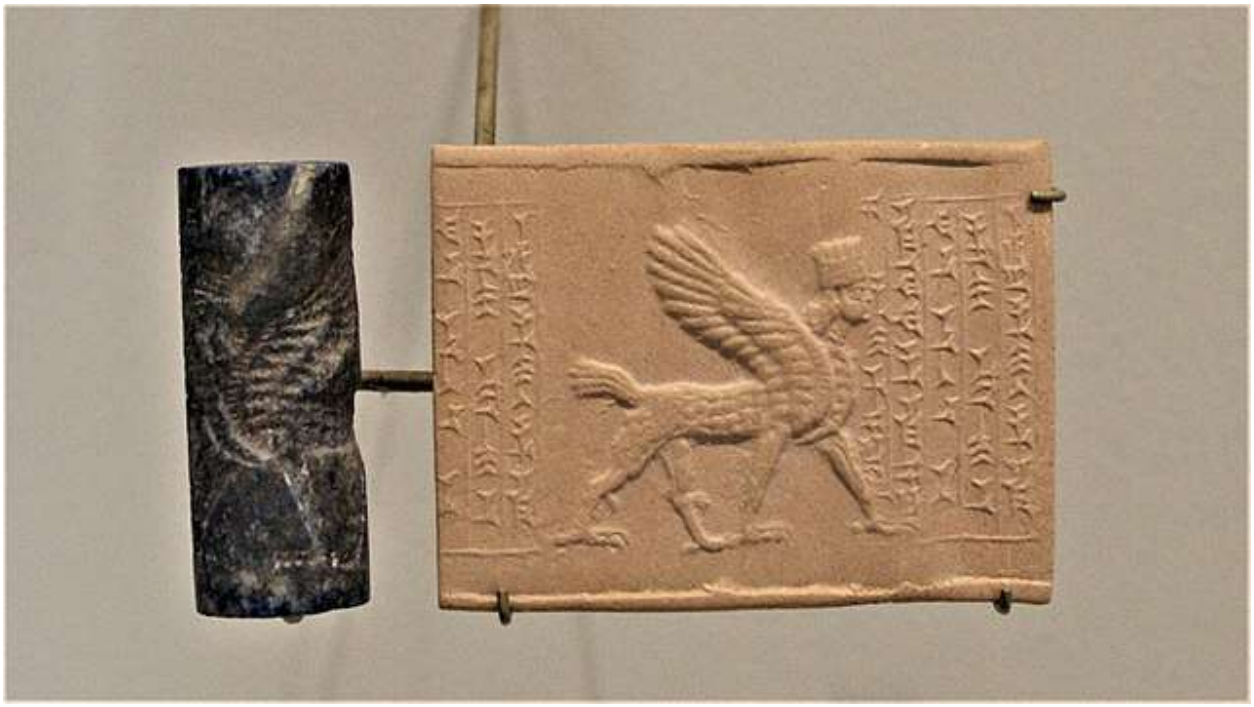
Differences between the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian Empires

The Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian Empires were separated by a period of almost one thousand years, but they had a lot in common. This may be due to the fact that the Neo-Babylonian kings worked hard to restore Babylon to its former glory and carefully restored many buildings and pieces of art that survived from the Old Babylonian Empire.

The Babylonians revered their heritage and made sure to carry some of the old traditions into their new empire. For example, even though the common language at the time was Aramaic, the Babylonians insisted on using the ancient Akkadian language in their government. While restoring the city, the Neo-Babylonians found the sites of old Akkadian temples and a statue of Sargon the Great, which they immediately restored and revered. The Chaldean kings also followed Sargon's example by giving one of their daughters the position of the high priestess of the moon god Sin. It also seems that the justice system in Babylon hadn't changed much since the days of

Hammurabi, although the punishments became more focused on monetary fines instead of limbs and death.

The Old Babylonian Empire had focused on conquest as a way to expand the empire, but the Neo-Babylonians were expert businessmen. Their economy was based on the bustling commerce that took place all throughout the empire. Art styles had also changed, and Babylonian artisans incorporated many Assyrian themes into their reliefs, carvings, and literature. The region had been ruled by the Assyrians for so long that it was impossible to completely erase their influence from Babylonian culture.



Neo-Babylonian cylinder seal

While the Neo-Babylonian Empire didn’t last as long as some of its contemporaries, it still managed to achieve more than most empires that came before it. Babylon was a stable, prosperous, and influential empire that fostered innovations in science, mathematics, and architecture. Thanks to the efforts of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II, Babylon became one of the most famous empires in history, but it set a standard that its successors could not live up to. When Nebuchadnezzar II died in his glittering city, his empire began a steady decline. The empire became a shadow of its former self, and by the time the Persians marched on Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II’s beloved city was conquered without a fight.

Chapter 11 – The Fall of Babylon

The ancient city of Babylon was built along the banks of the Euphrates River and quickly became a religiously significant city. When King Hammurabi took power, he raised the city to phenomenal heights and left behind a legacy that would be studied for hundreds of years. After his death, his empire fell on hard times and was overrun by foreign enemies who respected the city enough to let it exist in their new empires but took massive tributes from it and prevented it from reaching its full potential. Despite its reduced position, the residents of the city maintained a level of pride that allowed it to antagonize the feared Assyrian Empire time and time again. When the Assyrian kings retaliated, they were severely punished and/or assassinated for desecrating Babylon's temples. The Babylonians had ample reason to be proud of their city and longed for freedom.

Finally, they were liberated from Assyrian rule, and Babylon was ruled by some of the greatest kings that Mesopotamia had ever seen. Under Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II, the Neo-Babylonian Empire rose to become the center of the known world. Babylon's economy flourished, and artisans were able to innovate and perfect art techniques that would make Babylon one of the most beautiful cities to ever exist. However, this prosperity couldn't last, and when Nebuchadnezzar II died, his throne was passed from his son to his courtiers and eventually to the eccentric king Nabonidus and his politically inept son Belshazzar. When Babylon fell, the empire faded into history until the city became a forgotten pile of rocks in the desert.

While the other Mesopotamian empires crashed down on themselves, Babylon's fall was unique and provided an interesting account for modern generations to study.

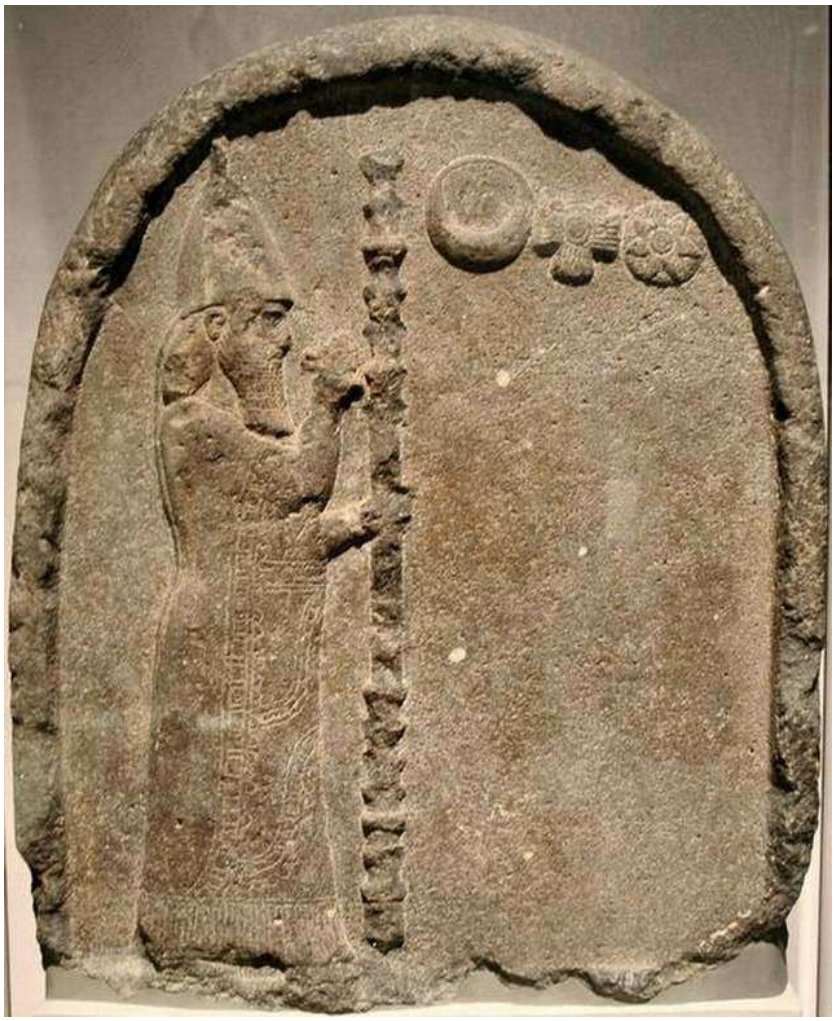
The Reigns of Nabonidus and Belshazzar

An empire can only be as strong as its kings, and while many empires are built through the efforts of extraordinary men, they are just as often destroyed through the incompetence of mediocre kings and political intrigue. This was what happened in the case of Babylon. The empire grew to amazing heights during the reigns of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II, but when Nebuchadnezzar II died, his heir was assassinated, and his son-in-law, Neriglissar, claimed the throne. This led to a time of political instability that eventually led to the assassination of Neriglissar's son, and the throne then

passed to a man named Nabonidus. This would prove to be the beginning of the end for the Babylonian Empire.

Nabonidus was supposedly the son of a priestess of the god Sin. Not much is known about his father, but inscriptions about his father, Nabu-balatsu-iqbi, refer to him as a prince, which may hint at a royal lineage. However, Nabonidus made no such claims. He did claim to be a descendant of Ashurbanipal, which would have been a clever piece of propaganda given Ashurbanipal's legacy. Nabonidus did not belong to the royal Chaldean line, though, and he was appointed as king after Labashi-Marduk's murder. It is unclear whether or not Nabonidus was a part of the coup that put him on the throne.

Since the city's inception, Marduk had been the principal Babylonian god and the patron of the Babylonian kings. The city of Babylon was the center of Marduk's worship, and his priests enjoyed a privileged position in the upper classes due to the kings' patronage. All of that changed when Nabonidus took the throne and began giving Sin more attention than Marduk, as he tried to make Sin the supreme Babylonian deity. This would have put Nabonidus at odds with the priestly class and the devoted worshipers of Marduk, who made up a lot of the Babylonian population. For hundreds of years, Babylon had maintained a level of prestige due to its status as a holy city, and the city was revered far and wide since Marduk's influence stretched to all of Mesopotamia. A king who did not follow the established pattern of the legendary kings before him and tried to shake up the deeply entrenched religious beliefs of his population would not have been welcomed.



King Nabonidus

For the first four years of his reign, Nabonidus carried out successful military campaigns against parts of Saudi Arabia, adding more territory to an already vast empire. However, for some reason, he left the throne in the hands of his son Belshazzar and went to the city of Tayma for nearly a decade. The city was located on a prosperous route between Babylon and Arabia, and it is known for being an interesting archaeological site that may have caught the king's attention while he was fighting against Edom. Nabonidus stayed in Tayma for nearly a decade, and while the reason for his extended stay in Tayma remains unknown, there are a number of prevalent theories that try to explain his odd behavior.

One theory is that the king suffered from mental illness and retreated to the oasis to recover. Some suggested that living in Babylon became unbearable for the king due to the elaborate festivals dedicated to Marduk that required the king to claim his exclusive devotion to Marduk, a duty that would have

been abhorrent to Nabonidus. Recent theories suggest that Nabonidus was forced into exile after a coup carried out by the priests and city officials. Some artifacts have been found bearing inscriptions that claim that Nabonidus suffered from an ulcer, and he may have been forced to take a step back from ruling to recover from an illness.

Whatever the reason, Nabonidus left Babylon and didn't come back until around 543 BCE. During that time, he left his son, Belshazzar, in charge. As Nabonidus's co-regent, Belshazzar had control of the government, the throne, and most of the army. Biblical accounts mention that Belshazzar had to deal with several economic crises during his reign, and historians suggest that while Belshazzar was an accomplished warrior, he may not have been the best politician. When Nabonidus returned to Babylon, the throne was quickly transferred back to him. He was just in time to meet the invading Persian army. Nabonidus took many religious statues from parts of Mesopotamia during his return so that they could be stored in Babylon. It's possible that he did this to ensure the loyalty of his people or to keep them safe from the Persians.

The Persians were an unstoppable force, and they seemed to take over Babylonia with relative ease. In 539 BCE, Babylon was captured without a fight, and the Neo-Babylonian Empire was handed over to Cyrus the Great less than a hundred years after it was founded. This was an incredible feat considering that the Persians had been an inconsequential state for most of Babylon's history. The rise of the Persian Empire was quick and would prove fatal for the once supreme Neo-Babylonian Empire.

The Rise of the Achaemenid Empire

Persia started out as a vassal state of the Median Empire and was allowed to govern itself in relative peace for some time. In 559 BCE, Cyrus succeeded his father, Achaemenes (after whom the Achaemenid Empire was named), as the king of Persia. During this time, the Median Empire was ruled by Cyrus's grandfather, Astyages. In 550 BCE, Cyrus led a rebellion that overthrew Astyages, and he took control of the Median Empire. This bold move led to a series of challenges, as not everyone wanted Cyrus as their king.

Cyrus recognized that he would need the full support of his vassal states if he wanted to build a successful empire. Unlike the Assyrians' and Babylonians' policy of deportation and replacing the heads of conquered states with loyal courtiers, Cyrus came up with a new strategy that would earn the loyalty of

his new states. He allowed local kings and governors to continue ruling and allowed the people to continue serving their own gods. This gave the conquered states greater freedom and would lead to less rebellion against his rule. Instead of having to return to conquered states to deal with rebellions, Cyrus could focus on gaining new territories.

Due to this policy of religious tolerance, Cyrus was able to rule without much interference from his conquered territories and was a popular ruler. The Persians called him their father, and he was beloved by his new subjects too. In the Bible, he is accredited with releasing the Jews from Babylon and allowing them to return home to rebuild their temple.

Around 547 BCE, Cyrus conquered another enemy, the king of Lydia, as he had taken over Median lands when Astyages was killed. Cyrus took over the Lydian lands, and some sources report that Cyrus treated the king well. There are several reports that Cyrus treated conquered kings with respect and allowed them to live out their lives in exile. Some of the Greek cities in the area tried to rebel against Cyrus, but he quickly put an end to them. While Cyrus didn't have to deal with many rebellions during his reign, there were still some states who wouldn't accept his rule. Cyrus was generally a kind ruler, but he didn't shy away from punishing rebels. Once he conquered most of the cities on the Aegean coast, he turned his attention to Babylon.

His reputation preceded him, and he became known for being an exceptional military leader, a capable politician, and a tolerant monarch. All of these factors would have endeared him to the Babylonians, who were less than happy with Nabonidus and his co-regent Belshazzar. In 539 BCE, Cyrus the Great marched on the greatest city in the world.

The Fall of Babylon

When King Nabonidus returned to Babylon, he probably found a city that had become discontent with his rule. The priests of Marduk made no secret about how much they disliked Nabonidus, and his deliberate snubbing of their New Year festivals dedicated to Marduk had offended many people. He also had to deal with the oncoming Persian army. While both Nabonidus and Belshazzar were accomplished soldiers, they were no match for the likes of Cyrus the Great. There are a few accounts of what happened between Nabonidus and Cyrus, but the most reliable record comes from the Nabonidus Chronicle, an ancient text inscribed in cuneiform. Historians have proposed that Cyrus met Nabonidus's army in southern Mesopotamia at Opis. The Babylonians were

quickly defeated, and Nabonidus had to retreat.

From there, Cyrus conquered Sippar, which apparently surrendered after a battle once they heard that Nabonidus had been completely defeated. From there, Nabonidus stationed his army along the Euphrates, probably hoping to defend Babylon from there. Cyrus knew that it wouldn't be worth his time to meet Nabonidus and his army in battle, so he sent some of his men to Babylon by way of the Tigris. When Persian forces arrived at Babylon, they diverted the Euphrates and were able to gain easy access to the city. A proper siege would have taken months since the walls were very strong.

Cyrus the Great

Since all the attention was focused on Nabonidus's army on the Euphrates, Babylon couldn't defend itself, and Persian records state that the city was captured without a fight. The Persians also attacked the city during one of the

religious festivals, which means that the residents would not have been prepared to fight back. And since Babylon's walls could not be breached, they probably felt safe and neglected other security measures. While the Persians claim that the Babylonians threw the gates open to welcome their liberators, this is unlikely. This may have happened when Cyrus finally arrived in Babylon a month later after the Babylonians realized what kind of ruler Cyrus would be.

Nabonidus was likely captured on his way back to Babylon, and historians theorize that he spent the rest of his life in peaceful exile, as there's no mention of his execution. Belshazzar, meanwhile, had died during the Persian conquest of Babylon, and an account of his death exists in the biblical record.

When Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, he received an entire empire that he quickly joined to his own. From there, the Persian Empire was primed to take over parts of Egypt and the Indus Valley, and it quickly became a massive world power that endured until the days of Alexander the Great. The Persians treated Babylon very well, and the city was allowed to exist in peace. In fact, under Persian rule, Babylon was able to continue as a cultural hub and produced some of the most magnificent art that the ancient world had ever seen. It became a jewel in the Persian kings' crowns, but it never again received the honor and reverence it enjoyed during the days of the Chaldean kings. As a result, it fell into decay and was completely abandoned by 141 BCE.

Babylon in Later History

The Persians treated the Babylonians very well, and Cyrus respected the city greatly. He decided to make the city his administrative capital, a decision that was supported by his successors. The city had also gained a reputation for its scholarly pursuits, and the Babylonian scholars made great strides in the field of mathematics, astronomy, and cosmology that influenced later scholars. It has been theorized that Pythagoras was able to develop his own work based on information gathered by the Babylonians. The Babylonians tried to gain their freedom a few more times, but the Persians were quick to put an end to any rebellions.

Although Cyrus and his successor, Darius, were kind to the city and allowed the Babylonians to continue their festivals to Marduk, some of the Persian kings did not share these same traits. Xerxes I viewed Babylon as inconsequential and even melted down a statue of Marduk, which enraged the

Babylonians. Xerxes had to deal with a few rebellions before he finally attacked the city and destroyed any hopes of independence.

About two hundred years after the Persian Empire rose, it was defeated by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE. He also showed special favor to the city and ensured that his men didn't loot the city after it was conquered. Alexander had ambitious plans for Babylon and was planning to restore it to its former glory. While he was in the city, he ordered that Babylon's ziggurat be rebuilt. This required it to be torn down, but Alexander wanted it to be even bigger and better than it was before. He died before he was able to complete this plan, and in time, the bricks that were meant to rebuild the ziggurat were carried away so that nothing was left.

Alexander died in 323 BCE, and his death triggered a series of vicious wars. These wars are known as the Wars of the Diadochi, during which time Alexander's generals fought for massive chunks of his empire. Babylon was caught in the middle of these wars, and its citizens had to evacuate the city or be caught in the crossfire, although some records claim that the Babylonians were deported. Either way, the city was abandoned, and it eventually became little more than a collection of stones.

Babylon's Legacy

In 1899 CE, excavations at the Babylonian site took place under an archaeologist named Robert Koldewey. He pioneered methods of excavating the distinctive mudbricks that were used to build many of Babylon's buildings. Over the course of about eighteen years, Koldewey and his team led several excavations and uncovered a lot of evidence dating back to the Neo-Babylonian period. He uncovered the Ishtar Gate and had it shipped back to Berlin, where it became a famous exhibit at the Berlin Museum.

While the site of Babylon lay lost in the deserts of the Middle East for hundreds of years, its reputation was still alive and well. It is mentioned in the Bible on numerous occasions, and its legend seeped into later history as well. Historians think that the city may have been the site of the Tower of Babel mentioned in the biblical record. According to the Bible, the sons of Noah made bricks out of mud and aimed to build a tower tall enough to reach the heavens. The city is mentioned again several times in the Old Testament, as the Babylonians had direct dealings with the Jews and Israelites.

Besides this influence, the Babylonians were also well known in the ancient world, and so, their record was noted by ancient historians, who spread the

story of the great city far and wide. All throughout its long history, Babylon held a place in the public imagination. It remains one of the most famous cities in history even though it was destroyed thousands of years ago. While its great kings came and went, the city endured and held a prestigious position in Mesopotamia. For most of its existence, it was a cultural hub that created pieces of art that stunned the ancient world. Thankfully, many of these pieces can still be seen today.

Chapter 12 – Art and Architecture in Babylon

At one time, Babylon was the most fantastic city in the world. The builders of Babylon were pioneers in the field of architecture. Since Babylon was the center of the ancient world for some time, visitors to the city reported on what they saw, and in this way, Babylon had a widespread influence. The art and buildings excavated at Babylon are beautiful, and many of the architectural wonders have been recreated in museums and can be seen by people today. Kings like Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar II were focused on building the most magnificent city in the world, and they succeeded. Evidence of their efforts can still be seen today despite the time these works spent covered in sand.

When visitors entered the city, the first thing they would have noticed was the walls of Babylon. Not only were the walls impregnable, but they were also so thick that chariots could be raced on the top of the walls, although this claim has been disputed by modern historians. From there, a visitor could enter through any of the numerous gates that dotted the walls, but the most attractive and popular of these was the Ishtar Gate. This gate was decorated with brilliant tiles and reliefs, and it led to a processional way that was used in festivals to Marduk, which were triumphant displays of the city's wealth. The city was brimming with attractions that would have delighted any visitor. Babylonia was one of the greatest empires in history, and its capital city reflected that status.

Babylonian Architectural Styles

Babylon's location on the banks of the Euphrates meant that builders had a lot of mud and clay at their disposal but very little rock. Instead of importing large quantities of rock, which would have been expensive and time-consuming, builders used what they had, which led to the development of mudbricks. Many of the buildings in Babylon were made out of mudbricks, and the earliest buildings feature the crudest bricks. To support these structures, builders developed buttresses that held up the walls they built. In time, these buttresses and walls became more elaborate. Unfortunately, these bricks weren't the most attractive building materials, but the Babylonians found ways around that by decorating their walls with colorful tiles, sometimes using zinc or gold plates in more elaborate buildings.

The Babylonians also began developing three-dimensional sculptures, and the whole city was filled with various sculptures. Babylon was also home to

some of the most accomplished gem-cutters in the world. As the city expanded and time went on, the buildings started featuring columns, frescoes, and pilasters. Builders plastered walls to make them more attractive and developed torch holders made from terracotta that were then painted. The city reflected the residents' devotion to their gods and featured a lot of religious imagery. Various temples dotted the Babylonian skyline, including Marduk's principal temple and its ziggurat.

Ziggurats were massive stepped structures that were predominant in Mesopotamia, and the ziggurat at Babylon may have been the famous biblical Tower of Babel. As Babylon became more influential, colorful brick walls became the norm, and better building materials were used, such as diorite and cedar wood, which were used extensively in both building and decorating.

The Old Babylonian Era

Babylon was an important city to the Mesopotamians due to its cultural significance. This meant that when the city fell or was destroyed for some reason, it was quickly rebuilt to prevent the wrath of the gods. It was an ancient city, but it was also subject to the whims of nature, and as a result of the Euphrates's changing river course, many of the city's earliest buildings have been submerged in water and can't be excavated. A lot of the information that historians have gathered about the Old Babylonian period comes from historical texts about the city, which makes it hard to gain an accurate picture of what the city was like.

However, some artifacts from that era still exist that give clues about the styles that were prevalent during that time. One of the most famous artifacts is the Stele of Hammurabi.

Carving of Hammurabi receiving his famous law code from the god Shamash

The stele is a large black-basalt ornament that is shaped like a finger. It features an intricate carving of the god Shamash, who was accredited with giving Hammurabi his famous law code. In the carving, Shamash sits on a throne and hands Hammurabi a staff and a ring, while Hammurabi holds his hands out to the god. The bottom part of the stele contains hundreds of cuneiform carvings in the Akkadian language outlining the legal code.

The Assyrian and Kassite Era

During the Middle Babylonian period, a time when the Babylonians were ruled by the Kassites and Assyrians, the development of art and architecture continued, albeit under new leadership. The Kassites were connected with many different kingdoms and were able to import many beautiful materials such as semi-precious stones, which were then used by artisans to create

jewelry and art. The Kassites used clay to make sculptures, and they began experimenting with glazed tiles, a work that would be continued and perfected by the Neo-Babylonians. They also restored temples in the area and left behind inscriptions of their work. During their rule, the Kassites also introduced kudurrus, which were boundary stones that were set up in temples to keep track of real estate in the kingdom.

Kassite kudurru stone

The Assyrians were also innovative builders, and their architecture shows the beginning of domes and experimentation with different building materials. At first, their buildings were identical to those of the Sumerians and Akkadians, but in time, they began to break away from traditional buildings and created unique structures that eventually became their trademark. Many of the Assyrian temples featured interesting styles, such as octagonal domes, which weren’t seen anywhere else at the time. Builders used a lot of wood in their structures, which eventually decayed, but historians are sometimes able to

recreate Assyrian works to get an idea of what Assyrian buildings must have looked like. The Assyrians also made hundreds of beautiful sculptures that were used to decorate their cities and temples.

Assyrian statues

The Neo-Babylonian Era

The Neo-Babylonian era was a time marked by prosperity and innovation, as this was when the Babylonians were finally freed from the Assyrians and became a powerful empire in their own right. It was during this period that Nebuchadnezzar II decided to turn Babylon into the most beautiful city in the world, and under his rule, Babylon indeed became the biggest city in the ancient world. The city was surrounded by massive walls that had eight gates, the grandest being the Ishtar Gate, which has become one of the most famous sights associated with Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar II's Babylon featured not one but two ancient wonders of the world. One of those wonders was the city walls that dominated the Babylonian horizon.

Nebuchadnezzar II built extensively in the city, and by the end of his reign, he had three palaces in it. The Euphrates ran straight through the city, providing the people with the water they needed and giving life to the numerous gardens and parks. Marduk's temple, Esagila, sat in the middle of the city along with its ziggurat, Etemenanki. As a trading center, Babylon

featured several quays and warehouses.

The city was planned exceptionally, with a stone bridge along the western banks of the Euphrates, and the streets were built in a grid pattern, which would have made it easier to navigate. Many houses were built around a courtyard and were decorated with painted plaster and tiles, while the houses of the elite were much more elaborate. The city was incredibly beautiful and contained many features that would have been a delight to explore.

The Ishtar Gate

While Babylon had eight heavily fortified gates, the main gate was located north of the city and was built by Nebuchadnezzar around 575 BCE. He dedicated the gate to the Babylonian goddess of love, Ishtar, and it was directly linked to the famed processional way. The gate was richly decorated with blue glazed bricks that were meant to look like lapis lazuli and would have glittered in the sun. Images of bulls, lions, and dragons that represented Ishtar, Marduk, and Adad could be seen. There were also flower patterns and other patterns set into the gate that were supposed to represent fertility. The images of the gods themselves were also carved into the cedar wood that made up the roof and doors.

The Ishtar Gate

Some of the gate panels are located in museums around the world, and there’s a reconstruction of parts of the gate in the Pergamon Museum in

Berlin. While the reconstruction is massive, standing at about fifty feet high, it's not as big as the original gate. The Ishtar Gate featured two gates, a smaller one in the front and a larger one in the back. The reconstruction in the Pergamon Museum is of the smaller gate. The gate was discovered during the excavation at Babylon that took place from 1904 to 1914.

The Processional Way

Once a year, the Babylonians held a massive festival to welcome the beginning of a new year. This holiday would have lasted about twelve days and would have featured several elaborate religious rituals. The processional way was built specifically with this festival in mind, and every year, the Ishtar Gate would be the site of one of the most anticipated festivals of the ancient world. The processional way was over half a mile long and ran along the Euphrates straight to the temple district. Both the gate and the processional way featured images and symbols that represented the gods Marduk, Adad, and Ishtar. The purpose of the gate and the processional way was also to protect the city. The Babylonians believed that their gods fought for the city, and they went to great lengths to appease their deities.

Several lions, bulls, and dragons lined the processional way and were made out of colored bricks; they were meant to symbolize the protection of the city. The gates were designed with battlements that would have made it easier to defend the walls if the city ever came under siege, and the buttresses at the Ishtar Gate were decorated to emphasize its defensible position.

During the festival, priests would carry statues of their gods through the streets, which would have been a chance for the local people to catch a glimpse of their deities and spend some time with them. An important part of the festival was when the king would pledge his allegiance to Marduk, which would have confirmed Marduk's supremacy over the Babylonians. Priests and royals would take part in the procession, and the statues of gods and goddesses would have been decorated with fine clothes and ornate jewelry. The statues were pulled by bejeweled chariots and would have been an impressive sight.

Babylon's Walls

Part of the reason Babylon endured for as long as it did was because of its massive walls. Babylon's walls were notoriously impenetrable, and when the Persians marched on Babylon, they knew that it would be better to try and find a different way into the city, as breaching the walls would take months,

maybe even years. Hammurabi was the first to build walls around his city, but those walls eventually had to be replaced. For a period, Babylon was protected by powerful double walls that kept invaders out. Nebuchadnezzar II took the time to rebuild the massive walls and built a third wall around the city.

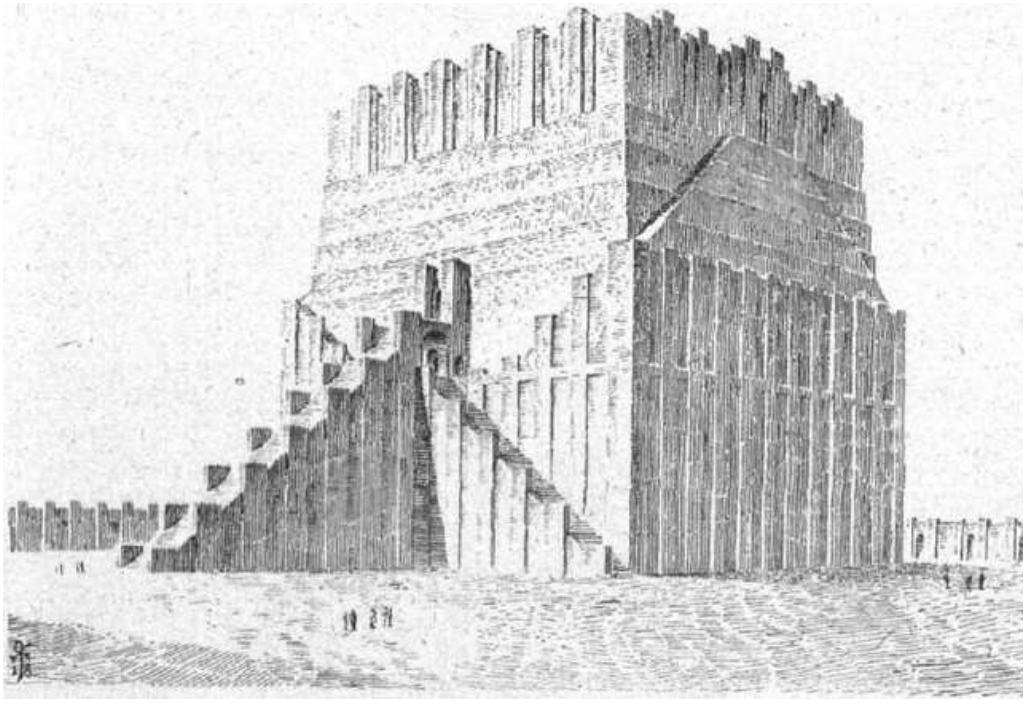
Walls of Babylon

He also felt the need to build the Median Wall, which ran between the Tigris and Euphrates and stood at about one hundred feet. While ancient historians disagree about the exact height of the walls, one thing is for sure—they were massive enough to be of note during a time when most cities featured fortified walls. The walls were built using mudbricks and were laid in bitumen, with reeds separating the main courses of the wall. There were guard towers all along them, although scaling the walls was impossible.

The Tower of Babylon

The ziggurat Etemenanki was a massive structure that dominated the Babylonian skyline and was closely linked to the Esagila temple. This structure may have been the Tower of Babel mentioned in the biblical account. In the Bible, it is said that mankind decided to build a massive tower that would reach the heavens. The work progressed quickly since mankind spoke a common language, and they planned to stay in one place forever. However, this was in direct conflict with God’s purpose for mankind to fill

the earth, and so, He confused their languages, causing the work at the tower to be halted.



The Etemenanki ziggurat

Whether or not Etemenanki was that biblical tower, it was still an impressive structure that was dedicated to the god Marduk and featured several shrines that were dedicated to him. The exact origins of the ziggurat aren't known, but it was destroyed by Sennacherib in 689 BCE. It was restored by Esarhaddon, although the restoration was continued by Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II. The ziggurat consisted of seven different levels and was made from bricks and bitumen. It was likely connected to the processional way. The ziggurat was an impressive structure that would have been visible from most parts of Babylon. It even inspired Alexander the Great to renovate it, but he died shortly after the ziggurat was destroyed, and its reconstruction was permanently halted.

The Esagila Temple

Since Marduk was devoutly revered by the Babylonians, it would make perfect sense that his main temple would be one of the wonders of Babylon. There were several other temples in the city, but the Esagila temple was the most important. It was located close to Etemenanki and was made up of three courtyards that were surrounded by chambers used by the priests of Marduk. According to reports, it was about 660 feet (200 meters) long and filled with

riches donated by the kings of Babylon and Marduk's worshipers.

The temple complex has been excavated in recent years and shows that the Babylonian kings frequently renovated the temple to keep Marduk happy. However, very few artifacts remained in the temple, as it had been looted by several armies and squatters who made their home in the ruins. During its prime, the temple would have been a bustling hub in the middle of the city, and it would have handled some of the most precious items in the Babylonian Empire.

The Statue of Marduk

Statues were very important in the ancient Babylonian religion since they represented the gods themselves. The Esagila temple featured several statues of Marduk. The most important of those has been nicknamed the Asulhi and was used during the famous New Year festivals when it was paraded through the processional way. The statue was made from wood and covered with silver and gold, and it would have been featured prominently at the Esagila temple. It was used during the festival's most important ritual, during which the king of Babylon would prostrate himself before Marduk (who lived in the city through his statues) and symbolically offer his crown to the principal god of the Babylonians. The festival and its accompanying rituals would thank the gods for the fertility that Babylon enjoyed and ask for its continued prosperity.

Drawing of Marduk

However, the statue was also a target for Babylon's enemies and was stolen several times during Babylon's history. No one is sure what ultimately happened to the statue, but it may have still been in existence around the time of Alexander the Great.

The Hanging Gardens

Babylon's second wonder of the ancient world was the hanging gardens. According to ancient records, the gardens were made up of manmade waterfalls, flowers, and shrubs that were arranged in a maze of terraces. The gardens were apparently made to resemble a natural mountain and drew inspiration from the mountains of Iran. According to legend, Nebuchadnezzar II built the gardens for his wife, Queen Amytis, who missed her homeland. Detailed accounts of the gardens describe them as a marvel and a paradise,

and they undoubtedly would have been the pride of the royal family.

Artists' rendering of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon

However, even though ancient historians wrote about them extensively, no evidence of the gardens has been found. It has been theorized that the gardens were built by Queen Semiramis, the wife of Shamshi-Adad V of Assyria, or even by King Sennacherib in Nineveh. While evidence of the gardens hasn't been found yet, they live on in the public imagination and are intimately associated with the memory of Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar II's Palaces

Babylon had three palaces during Nebuchadnezzar II's reign. There was a palace in the south that had an impressive throne room decorated with glazed bricks, probably the same blue and yellow colors that were used at the Ishtar Gate. The walls featured designs of flowers, palmettes, and lions. The southern palace is the most well preserved of the three and was about 1,065 feet by 720 feet (325 meters by 220 meters) wide. He also had a northern and summer palace, which haven't been fully excavated yet, so not much is known about them. However, it has been theorized that the summer palace would have been used as a retreat for the king when the city was at its hottest during the summer months.

Ancient Babylon brimmed with exquisite pieces of art that were used to

display the might and wealth of the empire. When the Babylonian Empire fell, the city retained some of its glory in its elaborate architecture and art. Kings and empires came and went, but Babylon remained a center of learning and art that made it the greatest city of its time and cemented its place in mankind’s history.

PART FOUR: Myths, Religion, and Dynasties

Chapter 13 – Lagash and Its Two Dynasties

Lagash was an ancient Sumerian city located between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers about fourteen miles (twenty-two kilometers) from a town named Ash Shatrah in modern-day Iraq. The city was built sometime during the Ubaid period, although its exact origins are unknown. It was still occupied when the Parthian age began around 247 BCE. Lagash never reached the same heights as cities such as Ur or Babylon, but it was still a prosperous and influential city that endured for thousands of years.

Map picturing the ancient city of Lagash

Excavations at the mounds that were once the bustling city of Lagash have revealed thousands of cuneiform tablets, which have given historians a comprehensive guide to ancient Sumerian culture. Lagash enjoyed a measure of wealth, and many of its rulers focused on developing art and religion. The city also maintained a certain level of independence during its long history, despite the several empires that came and went. Historians have discovered remarkable artifacts at the site, including the Stele of the Vultures that was built to commemorate Lagash's victory over a neighboring city, as well as

evidence of Lagash's famous two dynasties. While Lagash never became the center of a famous empire, it still boasts a fascinating history and experienced times of enviable wealth and influence.

The First Dynasty of Lagash

Historians have long relied on the *Sumerian King List* to provide them with a glimpse into the lives of the Sumerians, and for the most part, it is a fairly accurate record that has been invaluable in reconstructing Sumer's past. Unfortunately, the *Sumerian King List* completely ignored the rulers of Lagash, so historians have had to rely on a fragment known as the "Rulers of Lagash." The fragment was likely copied by scribes sometime during Lagash's early history. It records the history of Lagash beginning right after a flood (possibly the global flood mentioned in the Bible and Sumerian mythology) when mankind was struggling to provide for themselves. According to the fragment, the gods helped mankind develop irrigation and farming methods. As its name suggests, the "Rulers of Lagash" also records the various kings or *ensis* (rulers) that came to govern the city.

The rulership of Lagash has been divided into two distinct dynasties. The first dynasty began around 2500 BCE but ended when Lagash was conquered by Sargon the Great of Akkad. According to the "Rulers of Lagash," En-hegal was the first ruler of the city-state back when it was still controlled by the city of Uruk. For some time, Lagash continued under the rule of other kingdoms until Ur-Nanshe (or Ur-Nina) became the king of Lagash. Not much is known about his rise to power, but he likely came from a prominent family in the area. Despite his mysterious origins, historians found evidence that he quickly defeated Ur and Umma and gained Lagash's independence. Ur-Nanshe has been credited with founding the first dynasty in Lagash. During his time as king, he renovated temples, built irrigation systems, and generally seemed like a peaceful ruler with no ambitious dreams of conquest.

Carving of Ur-Nanshe

Ur-Nanshe ushered in a time of wealth and prosperity for the city and was succeeded by his son Akurgal, who seemed to share his father's policies. Akurgal only reigned for a short period of time and was succeeded by his son, Eannatum. Unlike his predecessors, Eannatum had a grander vision for Lagash and set about conquering the rest of Sumer. During his reign, he managed to subdue Nippur, Akshak, Larsa, Ur, Kish, Umma, and maybe even Eridu. Many of these states had to pay tribute to Eannatum, which was then given to the god Ninurta and the goddess Nina. Unfortunately, Eannatum's reign wasn't peaceful, and his vassal states would often rebel against him, with most of them breaking free of Lagash's rule after his death. During Eannatum's rule, he built many palaces and temples that bore his inscriptions. He also renovated the town of Nina, which may have later become the mighty city of Nineveh.

Eannatum was succeeded by his brother Enannatum I, who struggled to hold on to many of the territories that Eannatum had conquered. During this time, Umma rebelled against Lagash and lost, but it remained a problem all throughout Enannatum's reign. When Enannatum died, his son, Entemena, was crowned as king, and it seems that he shared more in common with Eannatum than with his father. Entemena quickly subdued Umma and ruled over the region of Sumer with a firm hand. Artworks found during this time

show the skill of Lagash's goldsmiths and silversmiths.

Silver vase dedicated to Ninurta by Entemena

Entemena is known for being a devout king who built several temples and cared for his people's spirituality. Unfortunately for Lagash, Entemena would be their last good king for some time. Entemena was succeeded by his son, Enannatum II, who didn't rule for a long time. After three more kings—Enertarzi, Enlitarzi, and Lugal-anda—the last notable king of Lagash, Urukagina, came into power. While Urukagina would reform Lagash's corrupt government, he would also lose one of the most important battles in Lagash's history.

Lagash and Umma

The ancient cities of Lagash and Umma were neighbors, but their relationship wasn't always peaceful. Around 2450 BCE, Umma and Lagash entered into a conflict that led to what may have been the first organized battles in history. An artifact known as the Stele of the Vultures describes what happened. Eannatum claimed that Ninurta sent him to conquer Umma. The two sides met in battle, and Eannatum led his men on foot against Umma's army.

Eannatum arranged his men in a phalanx formation and used spears against their enemies. There aren't many more details about the battle, but by all accounts, it was a short battle that resulted in Eannatum's victory.

Stele of the Vultures, which depicted Lagash's victory over Umma

For years, Umma had to pay tribute to the king of Lagash, and after its defeat at the hands of Eannatum, Umma's people were forced to put up a series of shrines to honor Lagash's victory. This would have cemented Eannatum's conquest, but it would have humiliated the residents of Umma. After Umma was subjugated by Eannatum, the city looked for ways to gain its independence. It revolted several times during Lagash's first dynasty, but these were always subdued before they could reach their goal. When Lagash began to decline after Entemena, Umma bided its time until it struck again.

From the time of Entemena, the priests and officials of Lagash had become greedy and abused their positions so that they could get money from the city's elite and used temple lands for their own gain. This corrupt form of government was slowly strangling Lagash and prevented it from thriving. Urukagina put a stop to all that and was known for being an enthusiastic reformer who cleaned out the government and reestablished the justice system. While Urukagina was determined to right the wrongs done by the

corrupt officials and priests, he didn't account for the power vacuum that resulted because of his reforms. He was focused on building temples and honoring the gods, but he didn't take the time to strengthen the army. Lagash was finally free of the leeches that were stripping the city of its wealth, but a larger and more immediate threat loomed on the horizon.

Umma, which was under the rule of Lugal-Zage-Si, had seen its chance to strike. Lagash was in a precarious position, for Urukagina swept through the city, removing any corrupt officials and failing to appoint trustworthy ones in their place. The problem with his reform was that while it was well-intentioned, it weakened Lagash, as it struggled without proper leadership and because of Urukagina's strict rules. Lagash was a beautiful and rich city with fertile fields, and its treasuries contained tributes from all of Sumer. Urukagina should have focused on protecting the city as well as cleaning it up. Unfortunately for Lagash, when its enemies attacked, it didn't have a strong enough army to neutralize the threat. When Lugal-Zage-Si conquered Lagash, he received all of Sumer as his prize and was able to rule for twenty-five years. His victory was so complete that Lagash wasn't able to return to its former splendor, and when the city was conquered by Sargon the Great, he found a city that was only a shadow of what it had once been.

Lagash and the Akkadians

While Umma ruled over Lagash, a new empire had begun to emerge that would change the region of Sumer forever. The Akkadians quickly established themselves as a powerful empire and conquered many Sumerian cities, including both Lagash and Umma. Around 2300 BCE, Sargon the Great marched through Sumer, laying waste to any city that tried to oppose him. After he conquered the ancient cities of Ur and Uruk, he turned his attention to Lagash and Umma.

During this time, many of the cities that had been subject to Uruk thought that it was the perfect time to try and assert their independence, but they stood no chance against Sargon. The cities were destroyed, and their residents were required to pay tribute to their new king. It was Sargon's custom (and the Akkadian kings who succeeded him) to destroy entire sections of a city's walls and remove the gates so that the walls wouldn't be a useful defense if the city tried to rebel against Akkadian rule.

Many Sumerians hated the Akkadian Empire, and there were frequent uprisings. After the death of Sargon the Great, his son Rimush ascended to

the throne and experienced massive rebellions. His response to these rebellions was brutal, and he would set the pattern for future empires such as the Assyrians and Babylonians. He took his army to the cities that rebelled and killed thousands. The practice of mass slaughter in response to a revolt proved to be very successful, and Rimush kept accounts of his efforts. According to inscriptions from his time, Rimush killed over eight thousand people and enslaved over five thousand from the cities of Ur and Lagash.

An archer from one of Rimush's victory stelae

While Lagash was unable to overthrow Akkadian rule, the city didn't always suffer under the Akkadians. One of the Akkadian kings, Naram-Sin, left behind records that stated that he maintained the temples in Lagash. There are also many records of the commerce between the cities of Umma, Lagash, Kish, Nippur, Adab, and Erech, which shows that the city enjoyed a measure

of economic prosperity. As long as Lagash didn't rebel against the Akkadians, the people were mostly left in peace and were allowed to trade with neighboring cities.

During the Akkadian era, the kings would appoint *patesis* that would govern the city and report back to the king. The role of *patesi* seems to have included both religious and administrative duties. Ancient records name some of the *patesis* that ruled Lagash during that time, but they didn't do much to gain Lagash's independence. In time, the Akkadians were overrun by the Gutians, and other powerful kings began to emerge. One of these was King Ur-Nammu, who ushered in a time of prosperity and wealth for the city of Ur. During this time, Lagash was still ruled by *patesis*.

To the people then, it may have seemed as if the city of Lagash had already experienced its golden age and that the city was destined to fade into obscurity. However, all that changed because of a man named Gudea.

The Second Dynasty of Lagash

The Akkadian Empire managed to unite the region of Sumer under one rule. The Akkadian kings put administrative systems in place to rule their vast empire and wielded a very powerful army. They were also hated and had to subdue frequent rebellions, which they crushed successfully. In time, however, the empire began to weaken, and they encountered an enemy that they could not defeat.

The Gutians were a tribal people who came from the Zagros Mountains. Unlike the Akkadians, they did not have a massive army at their disposal, but they engineered an ingenious invasion tactic that completely baffled the Akkadians. The Gutians would strike at Akkadian territory and loot the rich cities. They operated quickly and were very difficult to track, which meant that they could attack at any time and catch a city off-guard. By the time the Akkadian army was able to come to a city's aid, the Gutians were gone and had taken a considerable amount of wealth with them.

For a time, it seemed that the Gutians were unstoppable, and the people thought that they were sent by the god Enlil to punish the Akkadians. It wasn't long before the Gutians attacked the Akkadian capital city of Akkad, and the Akkadian Empire fell completely. While the Gutians were successful conquerors, they were not able to properly govern their new territories. The Gutians were warriors and tribesmen who saw very little use for such things as administrative policies and record-keeping. Their rule was an affront to the

Sumerians, who were cultured and refined. While the Gutians ruled Sumer, they didn't check up on various parts of the empire, which meant large portions of Sumer were relatively independent and were allowed to do what they wanted, especially in the south.

During the rule of the Gutians, Lagash once again became an important city that enjoyed more independence than it had since its first dynasty. Around 2141 BCE, a new *patesi* named Gudea took control of Lagash. While historians don't know much about his early life or how he came to power, they do know what his reign was like thanks to a series of comprehensive documents, which are some of the most detailed in Sumerian history. He took the time to rebuild parts of the city, including temples and government buildings.

Statue of Gudea

Unlike the Gutians, he saw the need for detailed administration and revived many old Sumerian policies. He also went by the title *ensi*, which honored the principal god of Lagash. He claimed to be a servant of the gods instead of a god-king like the Akkadian rulers. During his reign, Lagash was enriched

and enjoyed trade with distant lands as well as beautiful buildings. His rule was mostly peaceful, and the districts of Lagash became rich under his watch. Gudea left behind numerous inscriptions that attested to this peaceful era, and historians have found evidence that the development of art flourished during his reign. The citizens of Lagash were able to worship their gods in peace and developed intricate religious rituals.

Gudea wasn't an ambitious king and didn't set his sights on conquest. In fact, it was a later king, Utu-Hegal, who finally overthrew the Gutians and ushered in a time of prosperity for the whole of Sumer.

The Fall of Lagash and Its Legacy

While the Gutians allowed some Sumerian cities a measure of independence, they were still hated and placed a massive strain on the Sumerian economy. Some rulers, like Gudea, were able to thrive despite the Gutian scourge. He may have fought back somewhat against the Gutians during his lifetime, but he mostly focused on strengthening Lagash. Around 2122 BCE, Gudea died after a long and successful reign and was succeeded by his son, Ur-Ningirsu. He only ruled for three years, and historians are not sure why his reign was so short, but by that time, more exciting things were happening beyond Lagash's walls.

Utu-Hegal of Uruk managed to overthrow the Gutians, and Sumer began to flourish once more. This opened up the way for the Ur III period (or the Third Dynasty of Ur), which was a time of Sumerian revival. In 2112 BCE, Utu-Hegal was succeeded by Ur-Nammu, who quickly subdued Lagash and its neighbors. Ur-Nammu was a good king who developed what may have been the earliest law code in human history, the Code of Ur-Nammu.

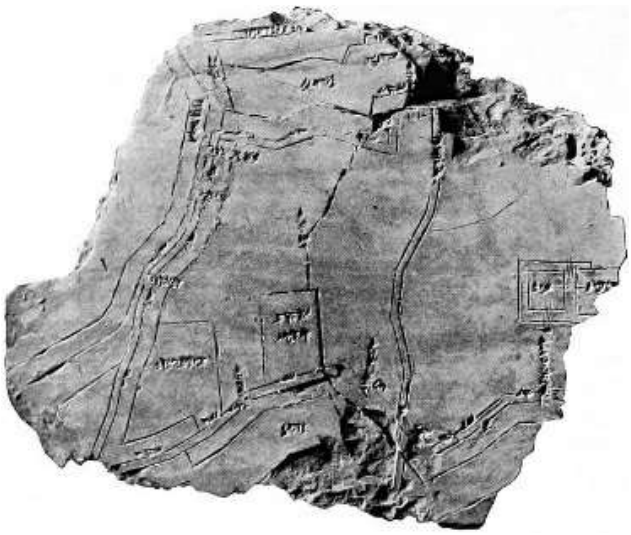
By that time, the city of Lagash had already experienced its golden era and slowly faded into the background of Mesopotamian history. It was first excavated by Robert Koldewey in 1887, and a few more excavations took place in 1953, 1968, 1976, and 1990. These excavations revealed unexpected treasures and shed light on a period of history that had been shrouded in mystery. In 2019, the University of Cambridge returned to the site as part of the Lagash Archaeological Project, which will surely provide the modern world with even more insights into one of the more fascinating ancient Mesopotamian cities.

Chapter 14 – Nippur: The Religious Epicenter

The site of the ancient city of Nippur can be found in the southeastern region of Iraq and has been the focus of archaeological research for almost a century. The city occupied a unique position on the banks of the Euphrates River, and it sat right in the middle of the two important cities of Akkad and Sumer. This advantageous geographical position would have meant that the city was in a perfect position for trade between the two regions, but it would also have likely served as a center of diplomacy for feuding kings to meet in the middle and discuss truces or peace.

Ruins of a Nippur temple

While it enjoyed a good position on the Euphrates, its significance did not stem primarily from its location. Nippur was an extremely wealthy city that maintained its importance for hundreds of years and was revered by the kings of several empires. All of this was due to the fact that Nippur was a sacred city where several temples were dedicated to the Mesopotamian gods. The city's patron was none other than the god Enlil, who was one of the most important gods in Mesopotamian history. Enlil's word was final, and he was the one who granted kingship. This was why Mesopotamian kings had to present themselves to Enlil at his temple in Nippur whenever they took power and why they lavished loot from their conquests on the city when they returned from war.



Clay tablet of the plans of Nippur

Enlil had the power to legitimize a king's rule, which made Nippur a crucial city in Mesopotamia. While it never became the center of an empire, it occupied a sacred position that kept it safe throughout the ages.

Enlil and the Rise of Nippur

Mesopotamian history is full of stories about empires that rose and fell, as well as the different cultures that influenced the regions. These different cultures and empires didn't have much in common, but they did share one common trait. They were all very eager to appease their gods and spent a lot of time building temples for these deities. While there were many different religiously significant cities in Mesopotamia, Nippur was arguably the most important of them, and this was due to its status as the home of the god Enlil.

Carving of the god Enlil

Enlil was a supreme deity and was only subject to the god Anu. His name has been translated as “Lord of Air” or “Lord of the Wind,” which indicates that Enlil was likely the god of the atmosphere. Anu was the god of the heavens, and Enki was the god of the earth. Enlil also bore titles such as “King of All the Lands” and “Father of the Gods,” which indicates how highly he was regarded by the Mesopotamians. The Mesopotamians also credited him with the powers of creation and destruction. According to them, Enlil was the “decreer of fates,” which put him in charge of everyone and their futures. In ancient Mesopotamia, it was widely accepted that if Enlil made a decision, it was final. Nothing could be done to change what he had decided, although there were occasions when he changed his own mind, such as in the Mesopotamian version of the story of the global flood. The ancient Mesopotamians also thought that various gods met at Nippur and made decrees about mankind that Enlil then carried out.

While Enlil had the power to destroy mankind and frequently was given credit for the destruction of certain dynasties and cities, he was also beloved because of his reputation as the “Lord of Abundance.” The ancient Mesopotamians theorized that Enlil created mankind at Nippur, which may have also explained the city’s importance. Throughout the ages, various kings would travel to the city of Nippur so that Enlil could legitimize their rule. While Nippur didn’t always enjoy the same elevated status in Mesopotamian history, it still managed to endure for a long time. Even when the Babylonians rose to power and declared Marduk as the supreme god, Nippur was still given a measure of importance. The great Babylonian King Hammurabi claimed to have received his famous law code from Enlil himself. Over time, other gods such as Ninurta and Marduk received more attention and devotion, but Enlil and Nippur, by extension, remained firmly established in the Mesopotamian pantheon.

Nippur Before Sargon

The ancient city began as a simple village composed of reed and clay huts in the marshes that surrounded the Euphrates River. This meant that any settlements there were regularly washed away when the Euphrates flooded. In time, the people began to move higher on the banks of the river, which would have saved them from the floods. As civilization developed, clay bricks began to replace reed buildings, and the people built a shrine that was likely used for religious purposes. Historians have found evidence that the dead were cremated at this ancient shrine.

In time, the village grew into a city, as various kings built temples to important gods at the site. According to ancient records, King Enmebaragesi of Kish was one of the first to build a temple in the city. The earliest Sumerian rulers visited the city and conducted ceremonies at the ancient temples. There are even mentions of the legendary king Gilgamesh visiting the temples at Nippur. Not much is known about the town, but it is estimated that Nippur had become a fully established city around 2500 BCE. Its reputation as one of the oldest cities in Mesopotamia has made it the subject of archaeological fascination because no matter what dynasty was ruling at the time, Nippur was given special attention.

Thanks to its reputation as a divine city, Nippur received many visitors during the years, and it became a bustling economic center that attracted residents to its districts. The city was situated on fertile lands, which produced more than enough food for the population. It also received plenty of

gifts from kings, the social elite, and devout worshipers who traveled to the city to pay respects to their gods.

While Nippur gained influence because of Enlil, there were many other temples dedicated to other gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon, including Ninurta and Inanna, which would have attracted a myriad of pilgrims who would have streamed into the city over the ages. Since not much is known about its earliest days, it is hard to draw conclusions as to why the ancient Mesopotamians chose Nippur to be such a sacred city. Whatever the reason, Nippur continued to stand while dynasties came and went. That does not mean that Nippur never faced challenges, and one of the first massive challenges it would face was the Akkadian conquest.

Nippur and the Akkadians

When the Akkadians rose to power, most of Sumer was powerless to stop them. They brought great destruction with them, and many city-states fell to their armies. Despite repeated rebellions, the Akkadians remained firmly in power for over a century. The Akkadian kings were powerful and fearsome, and they often resorted to violent tactics to keep their power. However, they were also pious men who went to great lengths to prove their reverence for the divine. The great kings of Akkad paid special reverence to Nippur. They would have attended the religious festivals at the city and donated some of their incredible wealth to the temples, which would have enriched the priestly class and added to the city's prestige.

It seems that King Naram-Sin, in particular, held the city in high regard, as he rebuilt the temples and city walls, leaving his inscriptions all over the city. However, it was during Naram-Sin's reign that Nippur tried to gain its independence, along with other cities in the region. Naram-Sin didn't take this too kindly and quickly put a stop to the rebellion by defeating the city. A famous piece of literature dated back to the Ur III period called the "Curse of Agade" centers around King Naram-Sin and Nippur.

Cuneiform tablet containing Curse of Agade myth

According to the legend, Naram-Sin earned the displeasure of the gods, especially Enlil, because of his disregard for religion. The gods withheld their blessing from the city of Akkad, which enraged Naram-Sin. The king tried everything to get the gods to turn their attention to Akkad again, but they ignored him and his numerous gifts. Frustrated by the lack of response from the gods, Naram-Sin decided to take action. In the legend, Naram-Sin traveled to Nippur and destroyed Enlil's temple, Ekur. Before he could get too far, he was struck by the gods and died immediately. The gods then decided to punish the Akkadians by sending the Gutians to attack them.

While the Curse of Agade is one of the most famous Mesopotamian myths, it

seems to be completely false, as there is no evidence that Naram-Sin ever destroyed Ekur. From all accounts, he did his best to never offend the gods. Nippur was highly regarded by the Akkadian kings, who regularly showered the city with gifts and commissioned building projects in the city. However, when the Gutians overthrew the Akkadians and Sumer began to decline, the Mesopotamians needed to make sense of the events. It is likely that they decided that one of the Akkadian kings must have incurred the wrath of the gods, as these divine beings seemed happy to let the Gutians destroy Sumerian culture.

Despite the Akkadians supposedly incurring Enlil's wrath, it was Akkadian King Shar-Kali-Sharri who renovated the great temple of Ekur, which was known for being the most sacred building in all of ancient Sumer. Ekur was Enlil's home, where he lived with his wife, Ninlil. It even had a shrine dedicated to the goddess. It was also thought that Enlil's sons, Ninurta and Nanna (also known as Sin), lived in the temple with their parents.

Temple of Enlil

In Sumerian culture, Ekur was a place of judgment, and it was where Enlil decided on laws and decrees. Ekur was a massive temple complex that had

shrines to other gods and goddesses, as well as storehouses where the tributes to Enlil were kept. During the city's height, the storehouses would have been filled to the brim with incredible treasures from all over Mesopotamia.

Nippur during the Ur III Period

During the time when the Gutians controlled much of Sumer, Nippur faded somewhat. It, along with its neighbors, began a steady decline under the wanton administration of the Gutians. The Gutians likely didn't see the need to maintain the sacred city, as it doesn't seem as if they cared much about the Mesopotamian gods. Since the Gutians didn't leave behind many records, historians must rely on the Sumerians' descriptions of the invading horde. According to the Sumerians, the Gutians were godless barbarians who delighted in destruction. The Sumerians and Gutians didn't have much in common, and the Sumerian region was unable to thrive while the Gutians were in charge. When the Gutians were finally expelled from the region, many Sumerian cities, including Nippur, began to prosper again.

During this period, known as the Ur III period, Nippur once again became an honored and sacred city. The most famous king from this period was Ur-Nammu, and he began rebuilding parts of the city and did a lot of work on Enlil's temples. Excavations show that Ur-Nammu's work began right on top of Naram-Sin's project. Besides renovating the temple, which would have been the center of life in Nippur, Ur-Nammu was also accredited with building walls around Nippur and improving its infrastructure.

Besides building walls and temples, Ur-Nammu also built the ziggurat for Enlil in Nippur out of mud and clay bricks. The ziggurat stood close to Enlil's own temple as well as the temple of Bel (also known as Enlil). Over the years, the kings of Ur and the surrounding areas diligently paid tribute to the city and renovated temples and buildings as they saw fit. Historians have found numerous inscriptions on ancient buildings explaining what certain kings did and how they improved the city.

During these early years, Nippur was the undisputed home of Enlil, which was one of the greatest gods that the Mesopotamians worshiped. Most of the religious festivals held in the city at the time were dedicated to Enlil, as well as the vast amount of tribute that was brought to Nippur. The residents enjoyed the status and prestige that came from living in the same city as a supreme god. Various treasures have been found in the ruins of the city, which helps to prove that Nippur was part of vast trade routes and was

showered in gifts from the many pilgrims who made their way to the holy site.

When the region was overrun by the Elamites, their armies caused some damage to the city, but in time, even the Elamite kings came to show Nippur special favor. However, Nippur's influence stemmed completely from the reputation of the god Enlil, so when he faded into obscurity, so did the city.

Nippur during the Old-Babylonian Period

For centuries, Enlil had been one of the supreme gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon. He decided the people's fates, rescued and destroyed entire civilizations at will, and was worshiped with zealous fervor by the kings who shaped history. However, in time, a dynasty arose that didn't view Enlil as the supreme divinity subject only to Anu. The Babylonians worshiped Marduk as their principal god and transferred many of Enlil's qualities to Marduk, which led to Nippur's decline during the Babylonian rule.

However, historians have theorized that Enlil had begun to fade from prominence prior to the Babylonians, as Enlil's son, Ninurta, had risen to prominence. While there was a definite decrease in Enlil's influence, the myth of the god didn't disappear overnight. Records show that Nippur was still favored as Enlil's home, and the city still received many offerings and pilgrims. However, it probably didn't experience the same level of reverence as it did during the pre-Babylonian era. Hammurabi himself still honored Enlil and claimed that it was Enlil who made him victorious over King Rim-Sin I of Larsa.

On the famous Stele of Hammurabi, the king can be seen receiving the law code from Enlil, which reflects the influence that Enlil still had over the Mesopotamians. Historians still don't precisely know why Marduk became more influential than Enlil, but the ancient myths state that Marduk received that honor from Enlil and Anu. In time, the Kassites built a temple dedicated to Enlil in the city of Babylon, which proved his far-reaching influence.

Architecture and Archaeology at Nippur

Nippur remained an important city all throughout the Old Babylonian and Assyrian Empires. Ekur was renovated a few more times by the Assyrian kings, which included some of their greatest kings, such as Ashurbanipal. During this time, the city was built up to new heights, and its temples were renovated and showered with gifts. However, when the Neo-Assyrian Empire fell, Nippur began to recede into the shadows of history. When the Greeks

arrived in Mesopotamia, they found Nippur and decided that it would be a good place for a fortress.

The temple was built over and was surrounded by massive walls, while the ziggurat became an acropolis. The fortress was occupied during the Seleucid period from about 312 to 63 BCE. In time, the fortress was abandoned, and the city was reduced to a small village again. It remained inhabited during the Islamic period but was renamed Niffar. There was a short period where the city was the seat of a Christian bishop, but in time, the bishop was moved to the city of Nil. By 1200 CE, the city had been completely abandoned but was still respected as an ancient site.

In 1889, the University of Pennsylvania began excavating the site and found thousands of cuneiform tablets. The site continued to be excavated until 1990, and during that time, archaeologists found the temple of Enlil and its accompanying ziggurat. The findings at Nippur have provided the most information about ancient Sumerian history than any other site in the region. Nippur is a comprehensive time capsule of some of the most important periods in ancient Mesopotamian history.

Historians have found shrines and temples dedicated to other Mesopotamian gods, as well as art and buildings from different periods that give clues about Mesopotamian history as a whole. Cuneiform tablets gave an insight into religion, culture, government, and the economy during different periods. Despite the numerous excavations that have taken place at the site, there is still much to learn about the ancient city, which means that Nippur will likely continue to be a source of fascination for the modern world.

Chapter 15 – Mesopotamian Myth

Mesopotamia has a rich and storied history. It saw the meteoric rise of some of the greatest empires in history and then saw those same empires collapse in various ways. The people of the region enjoyed fertile lands but were also subjected to the changeable whims of nature that sometimes resulted in devastating floods, changing watercourses, and terrible famines. As empires rose and fell and as ancient cities endured, there were some people who stood out from the rest and left their mark on history. There were kings who gained independence and ousted terrifying invaders who went to live on after their deaths thanks to the myths that sprang up around their existence.

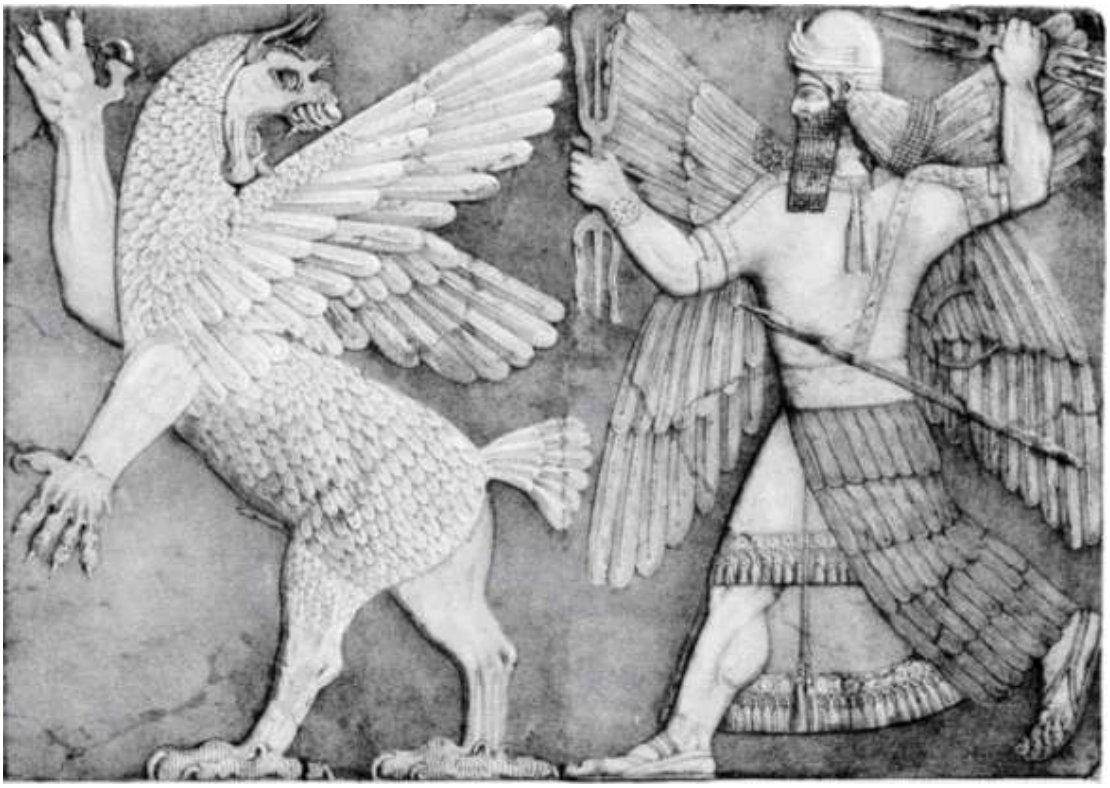
The Mesopotamians accredited their circumstances, whether good or bad, to the gods. And sometimes their heroes interacted with the divine, which led to tales of extraordinary courage and the achievement of (or in some cases the failure to achieve) immortality. Mesopotamia was home to some of the oldest cities and cultures in the world. The ancient Mesopotamians lived in cities built by people who they considered to be ancient. Thus, they needed to find a way to explain the history that they couldn't remember, and in the process, they came up with some of the most interesting myths known to man. The Mesopotamians were vibrant people who enjoyed telling stories and took great pride in recording those legends. Thanks to their efforts, historians have found entire libraries filled with mythical stories, some of which explain important topics such as the beginning of the universe and what happens after death.

The Creation Myth

While there are different versions of the Mesopotamian creation myth, the Babylonian version, also known as the Enuma Elish, is perhaps the most famous. The myth was carved onto seven tablets in total, and the most complete version was found at Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh, although older versions have been found, which suggests that the myth originated in ancient Sumer.

The story states that, in the beginning, the universe was made up of dark waters and that there was no order. In time, the water began to separate and formed two beings. The first was Apsu, who was formed from sweet water, while the goddess Tiamat was made up out of bitter water. This divine couple soon gave birth to the other gods. Unfortunately for these young gods, Apsu wasn't a good father and resented his noisy children. In time, Apsu decided to

kill his offspring, but his evil plan was overheard by Tiamat, who told her son, Enki, about what Apsu was planning.



Carving of Marduk in the battle against Tiamat in the Enuma Elish

Enki waited until Apsu was asleep, then he went and killed his father, which caused Tiamat to become angry and waged war against her children. Tiamat appointed the god Qingu as her champion and used him to punish her children. She also gave him the Tablet of Destiny, which gave him the power to control fate. In her grief, she also created eleven monsters that would help Qingu to win the war against her children.

This led to a terrible war with casualties on both sides. Eventually, the god Ea (also known as Enki) appointed Marduk as their champion. Marduk managed to kill both Qingu and Tiamat. He used Tiamat's corpse to create heaven and earth, while her tears formed the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Tiamat's eleven monsters were then taken as trophies, which was why the monsters' images adorned his own home. The Tablet of Destiny was used to legitimize his position as the supreme god. And then, along with the god Ea, Marduk created the first man, Lullu, from Qingu's blood. According to the myth, mankind was given the responsibility of keeping order on earth.

The Great Flood

During mankind's history, several cultures have developed their own version of a myth detailing a global flood. The Mesopotamian version is called the Atrahasis, and the oldest recorded version of this myth has been dated back to King Ammi-Saduqa, who reigned from 1646 to 1626 BCE, although the myth is thought to be much older than that.

The myth begins with the gods who take care of the earth. The elder gods forced all the younger gods to do the dirty work, which angered them and caused Enki to suggest that they create humans to do the work that they didn't want to do. The god We-Ilu sacrificed himself so that his body could be used to fashion humans. The goddess Ninhursag used his blood, flesh, and intelligence to build seven men and seven women.

While the humans were useful at first, they soon became unruly and caused the god Enlil to become angry with them. He decided that the human population had become too large and sent famines and drought to cull their numbers. Every time he sent a flood or drought, the humans would call to Enki, who would rush to their aid. Finally, Enlil decided to get rid of humans completely and sent a global flood.

Enki learned of the plan and warned a wise man named Atrahasis. The god ordered Atrahasis to build a wooden vessel that would carry him, his family, and two of every kind of animal to safety. Atrahasis obeyed, and when the floodwaters came, Enki hid Atrahasis from Enlil's sight. When Ninhursag saw what had happened, she wept for her children, and the other gods were disgusted by what had taken place. Enlil himself was devastated and regretted what he had done. It was at that point that Atrahasis was revealed.

Despite his earlier regret, Enlil raged at Enki for defying his orders. Atrahasis was able to smooth things over by offering sacrifices to the gods, which earned his immortality. As a compromise, Enki proposed that they put limitations on the human population to prevent overpopulation. As a result, the gods caused infertility in some women, as well as the arrangement that some women would serve the gods as virgins. They also sent demons down to earth that would steal random babies. Atrahasis was then taken to paradise so that he wouldn't have to live among the new humans.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is probably one of the most famous Mesopotamian myths and features several themes that modern audiences have found relatable. The epic was used to entertain Mesopotamian audiences for

centuries, and the story was probably a regular feature in ancient Mesopotamian theaters. While Gilgamesh was likely an ancient king who eventually became immortalized through the myth, his exploits were certainly exaggerated over time.

Gilgamesh subduing a lion

Gilgamesh's legend begins by painting him as a bad king who oppressed the people of Uruk and displeased the gods. In order to humble Gilgamesh, the gods formed a wild man named Enkidu. However, Gilgamesh thwarted their plan by turning Enkidu into a cultured one. He accomplished this by sending the priestess Shamhat to be his lover. In time, Gilgamesh and Enkidu became friends, and this friendship formed the heart of the myth.

Eventually, Gilgamesh became bored in Uruk, and so, he and Enkidu set out on a legendary quest. Their exploits angered the gods, who cursed Enkidu.

The once wild man then died, leaving Gilgamesh crippled with grief. Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu had turned him into a better king, and his friend's death left him feeling lost. Gilgamesh developed an unhealthy fear of death, and he decided that he would do whatever he could to gain immortality.

The myth of the global flood is also featured in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but in this version of the myth, the sole survivor of the global destruction is a man named Utnapishtim. Naturally, Gilgamesh decided to consult the only man who ever achieved immortality and set out on a quest to find him. The journey proved to be perilous, but eventually, Gilgamesh found him and asked for immortality. In some earlier versions of the myth, Utnapishtim rejected Gilgamesh's request, and the dejected king had to make the journey home. However, in other versions, the story became even more exciting, as Utnapishtim gave Gilgamesh a series of tests that he had to complete in order to achieve immortality. Unfortunately for Gilgamesh, he failed all three tests and was sent home empty-handed.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* contains many interesting stories that may represent ideas that were common at the time, and while it's certainly a very educational text, it also happens to be highly entertaining.

The Myth of Adapa

Since the earliest times, mankind has struggled with the concept of death, and many wonder why humans die at all. The Mesopotamians were no different, and the myth of Adapa was supposed to explain why humans weren't immortal like the mighty gods they worshiped.

A depiction of Adapa

The myth features the god of wisdom Ea, the sky god Anu, and the wise king of Eridu named Adapa. Ea created Adapa and gave him the gifts of strength and intelligence but not immortality. One day, while Adapa was fishing, the wind capsized his boat, and he fell into the sea. Adapa was very angry about being capsized, so he broke the south wind, which kept it from blowing for seven days.

The sky god Anu didn't take kindly to Adapa breaking his creation, and he summoned Adapa to the court of the gods so that he could explain his actions. Before Adapa could go to the court, Ea appeared and gave Adapa advice on how to act in the court of the gods so that the gods wouldn't get angry with him. Adapa trusted Ea completely because Ea was his father and creator.

Ea told Adapa how to show respect to the gatekeepers, Tammuz and Gishida, so that he could get through safely. He also told Adapa not to eat or drink anything offered by Anu, as it would kill him as punishment for breaking the south wind. However, at some point, Anu would offer Adapa a robe and anointing oil, which Adapa was supposed to accept.

When Adapa got to the court of the gods, he followed all of Ea's advice,

which puzzled Anu greatly. In the myth, it is revealed that Anu never wanted to kill Adapa but rather wanted to give him the food of life, which would give humans immortality. For some reason, Ea wanted to prevent humans from gaining immortality and tricked Adapa into refusing the food. When Anu found out, he punished Ea, but it was too late, and humans were doomed to die.

The Cutha Legend

A popular genre of literature in ancient Mesopotamian was something called Naru literature, which featured a king who interacted with the gods in some way. The story would follow the interactions between the king and the divine, as well as the results of that interaction. Ancient writers used to take figures who were already famous and built stories around their lives. The Mesopotamian kings were often featured in these stories because they left behind inscriptions about their reigns, which meant the general public would have already been somewhat familiar with the characters in the stories they were hearing, making Naru literature very popular.

Naru literature was written to sound like a king's autobiography. It was the custom of Mesopotamian kings to record their exploits on a Naru stele, and eventually, the word was used to describe the literature that featured the kings.

In the Cutha legend, the Akkadian king Naram-Sin is cast in the main role. This wasn't the first time that Naram-Sin was featured in Naru literature, as there are several other legends about him, including the Curse of Agade. Historians theorize that the Cutha legend was developed to teach people the importance of following the will of the gods and keeping accurate records.

The legend relates how the gods sent an army of monsters (historians have drawn parallels between these monsters and the Gutians) to invade the land. The gods told Naram-Sin to let the monsters invade the land and forbade him from fighting against them. Naram-Sin disobeyed them and marched against the monsters anyways. The story states that he sent three armies in three years. The gods withheld their blessing from Naram-Sin, and every time he sent an army, it would be completely destroyed.

In the legend, Naram-Sin blames an earlier king named Enmerkar for not leaving behind a Naru stele. And after his humiliating defeat, Naram-Sin learned not to defy the will of the gods and that implicit obedience was essential to success.

Ishtar's Descent

Ishtar was one of the most famous of all the Mesopotamian gods and is known for being the goddess of war and sexual love. One of the earliest myths concerning her is "Ishtar's Descent," which was developed by both the Akkadians and Sumerians.

Ishtar on an Akkadian seal

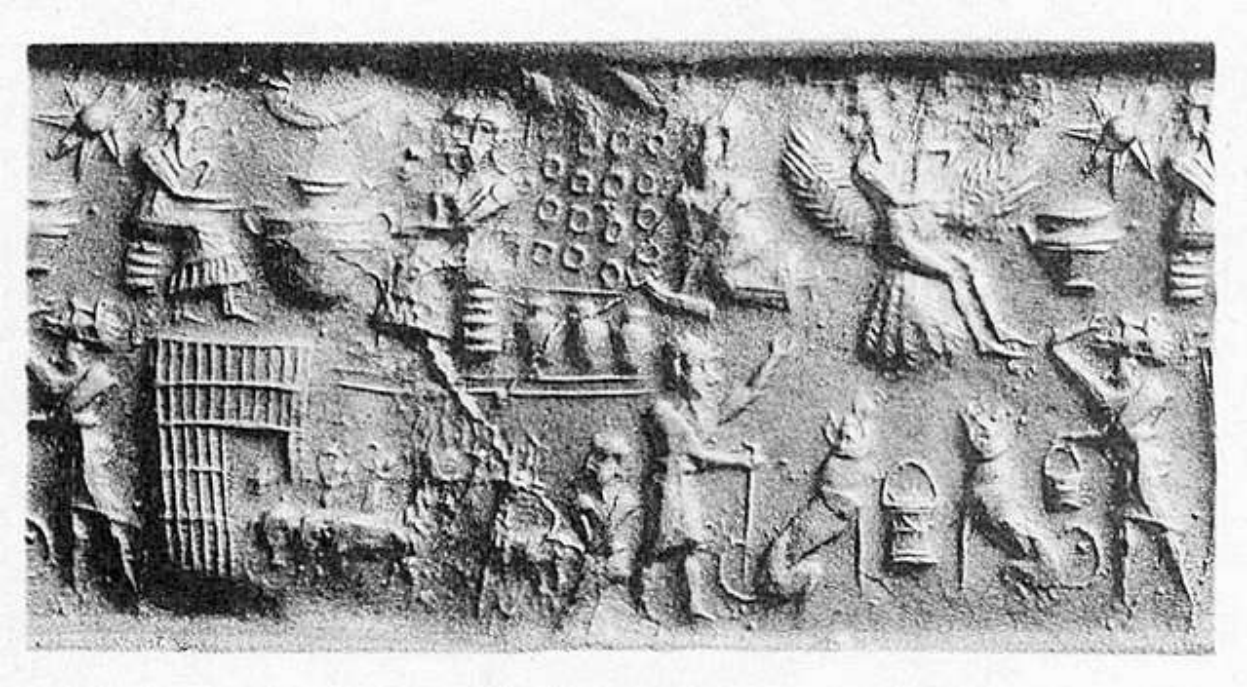
In the myth, Ishtar decides to visit the underworld for some reason. When she arrived at the gates, she ordered the gatekeeper to let her in. The gatekeeper was uncertain about whether he should let Ishtar in or not, so he went to ask for Ereshkigal, the goddess of death. Ereshkigal decided to let Ishtar in but demanded that the gatekeeper subject Ishtar to the ancient rites. This was a dangerous journey for Ishtar, as the underworld was known for being a place that no one, not even the gods, ever returned from.

The gatekeeper let Ishtar into the underworld but forced her to enter through seven gates. As she went through each gate, she had to leave behind an article of clothing, which represented her divinity. As Ishtar went into the underworld, sexual acts on earth stopped, which alarmed the other gods. In time, Ishtar made it down to the bowels of the underworld, where she met Ereshkigal. Unfortunately for Ishtar, by that point, she was completely naked

and had lost all her powers. This caused her to attack Ereshkigal, but the goddess of death simply imprisoned Ishtar and cursed her with sixty diseases. When the gods learned of Ishtar's predicament, they asked Ea to help Ishtar. Ea came up with a plan and created an androgynous boy named Asu-shu-namir. The boy was sent to the underworld and invoked the name of the gods against Ereshkigal, which forced her to give the boy the waters of life. He then used the waters to revive and free Ishtar from her prison.

The Story of Etana

The myth of Etana features the mythical first king of Kish and the lengths he was willing to go through to produce an heir who would take over his kingdom when he died. According to the *Sumerian King List*, Etana was the first king of Kish, and his dynasty lasted longer than his contemporaries, which showed that once a king died, successors were difficult to find. Historians theorize that the first dynasty of Kish may have been a result of the newly discovered practice of placing the king's first male child on the throne when the king died. If that theory is true, then it's possible that Etana's story was meant to remind kings that it was their duty to provide an heir no matter what.



The Myth of Etana as depicted on an Akkadian seal

In the myth, the gods created the great city of Kish, and the goddess Ishtar chose Etana to be the king of the city. Etana's first act as king was to build a

shrine to Adad. Etana built the shrine close to a massive tree that had a snake living in the roots and an eagle living in the tallest branches. The snake and eagle made a pact to care for each other's children and asked the sun god, Shamash, to enforce the pact. For a while, the arrangement worked out well until one day, the eagle ate one of the snake's children.

The eagle was punished by Shamash and the snake, and it was plucked before being thrown into a massive pit. At the same time, Etana and his wife were having difficulty conceiving an heir. Both the eagle and Etana called out to Shamash for help, and Shamash decided that they could help each other. Shamash ordered that Etana help the eagle out of the pit and care for him until his feathers grew back.

After the eagle was nursed back to health, Etana received a dream from the gods. In the dream, Etana rode on the eagle's back to heaven, where Ishtar gave him a fertility plant. At that point, Etana and the eagle were friends, so the eagle offered to take Etana to heaven. The first attempt was disastrous, and the pair returned to earth. After receiving a second dream, the eagle and Etana tried to go to heaven again and were successful. The myth ends with the pair bowing to the gods, and since the *Sumerian King List* records the reign of Etana's son, it is assumed that Ishtar gave Etana the Plant of Birth.

The Mesopotamians developed several interesting myths throughout their history and recorded them on clay tablets, which have provided a colorful insight into the mindset of the ancient Mesopotamians. Their stories contain valuable lessons and evidence that they were trying to make sense of the world around them. And while many of the stories were fabricated and exaggerated, they contain a few facts that preserve the legacies of some of the greatest kings who ever ruled.

Chapter 16 – Religion, Rituals, and Gods

Religion was a major part of life for the ancient Mesopotamians. They lived in a harsh environment that could leave entire cities flooded, while drawn-out droughts caused thousands to starve. Their location on the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers meant that they lived and died according to an ever-changing watercourse that was very difficult to predict. They had to make sense of the world around them, and they did that by developing a vast pantheon of gods that supposedly dictated their lives. The ancient Mesopotamians were devoted to their gods and accepted that the will of the gods was law, even though the gods could be callous and erratic.

The Mesopotamians developed elaborate rituals and built massive temple complexes that were the centers of ordinary life. Every aspect of the Mesopotamian lifestyle was influenced by their religions, and even kings would face dire consequences if they weren't deemed pious enough. While many different cultures lived in the Mesopotamian region, their gods were all similar to one degree or another. If a new empire came into power, they would sometimes absorb the gods that were worshiped by the locals into their own pantheon. The Mesopotamian pantheon was massive, with over a thousand gods, which makes cataloging all of the gods and their powers very difficult, but there are a few gods who were more influential than the rest and tend to be studied more.

Ashurism vs. Sumerian

Two of the main religions in the Mesopotamian region were Ashurism, which was practiced by the Assyrians, and Sumerian, which was developed and absorbed by some of the cultures that succeeded the Sumerians. Although the religions shared many similarities, they also had a few key differences. These religions eventually became the basis for many other Mesopotamian religions and are well worth studying.

It is important to remember, however, that the Mesopotamians may have worshiped some of the same gods, but that doesn't mean that those gods were equal. Some gods had more power in certain regions than others, and their influence fluctuated depending on which people worshiped them. For example, while Marduk was the king of the gods in Babylon, that distinction belonged to Enlil in the Sumerian region.

The Assyrians were a mighty nation who claimed that their god, Ashur or

Assur, was the supreme god. Their devotion to Ashur was so complete that they named their nation and their capital city after the god. Ashurism is a polytheistic religion, and the Assyrian pantheon boasted over two thousand gods and goddesses. The Assyrians worshiped their gods by means of images, carvings, and elaborate festivals and rituals. They believed that Ashur was all-powerful and omnipotent, which means that other gods and goddesses were simply different manifestations of Ashur.

While the Sumerians also used images and rituals to communicate with their gods, they believed that different gods lived in different cities. This means that each city was dedicated to a specific god. Their religion also centered around the supreme gods: Anu, Enlil, Enki, Inanna, Utu, and Sin. Often, their gods took on other forms, and in time, their names and positions changed.

Adad: The Storm and Rain God

Adad had several names and was known as Iskur to the Sumerians. He was known for being both generous and destructive. He used storms to punish the unrighteous or any who opposed him, but he used rain to give life and bring happiness to the region. His consort was Shalash, and he was widely worshiped in Babylon and Assyria. Historians theorize that his religions were popularized when the Amorites invaded the land. According to Mesopotamian mythology, he was the son of Anu, but others claim that he was the son of Bel.

A stele of Adad

In religious iconography, he is usually shown carrying lightning, and his sacred animals were lions and bulls, which were all used in his depictions. He didn't have his own cult, but his worship was quite popular. People lived in fear of his destructive storms and prayed for his life-giving rain.

Dagon: The God of Grain and Fertility

In ancient times, the Philistines claimed Dagon as their supreme god, and during those times, he was accredited with controlling the weather. However, over time, his powers and personality were assumed by the god Adad and Baal, with the latter often considered to be Dagon's son. His main temple was located in the city of Ugarit, although he had temples all over Mesopotamia, including in Asher and Gaza.

Ea: The Water God

Ea was also known as Enki and was revered as a friend to humans. He also had the powers of wisdom and magic, which he used to create humans and save them when Enlil sent the global flood to destroy all mankind. His father

was Apsu, and he is accredited with saving the younger gods when Apsu got annoyed with them and wanted to destroy them.

An image of Ea (or Enki)

He was especially honored by exorcists and magicians, as they believed that he gave them the power to carry out their mystical rituals. His patron city was at Eridu, which was regarded as one of the most sacred Mesopotamian cities. In Mesopotamian mythology, he is regularly depicted as acting in the best interests of mankind, which made him one of the most beloved gods in the pantheon.

Nabu: The Literate and Wise God

Nabu was known as the son of Marduk and the grandson of Enki/Ea, and he was married to the goddess Tashmet. His statue was usually kept at his principal temple in Borsippa, which neighbored Babylon. Once a year, his statue was transported to Babylon so that he could pay tribute to his father. He was the patron of scribes and artists and was usually depicted with a tablet

and stylus. According to the Mesopotamians, he developed writing and had the gift of prophecy. He was also the protector of the Tablet of Destiny, which could legitimize the rule of a god.

His worship persisted even after the fall of the Assyrian Empire, and he was a major part of the Babylonian Akitu festival. However, when cuneiform began to decline in popularity, so did the worship of Nabu.

Nergal: The God of Death and the Underworld

Nergal was also called Erra or Irra and ruled the underworld along with the goddess Ereshkigal. He was mainly worshiped at the city of Kutha, where he developed from a tribal god associated with agriculture. He was also the god of war, destruction, and death. One of the most popular myths containing Erra was the Epic of Erra. In the myth, he ousted Marduk from his role as the king of the gods and drove him out of Babylon before plunging the city into chaos and causing years of destruction and war. Erra’s advisor eventually convinced him to stop, which allowed Marduk to return to the city and restore order.

Depiction of Nergal

His shift to the underworld is explained in a legend that states that while the gods were feasting together, Nergal indirectly insulted Ereshkigal. In order to make peace with her, he moved to the underworld, where they eventually became lovers.

Enlil: The God of Air and Wind

Enlil was part of a triad of gods that ruled the sky, earth, and atmosphere. The triad was comprised of Anu, Enki, and Enlil, who were the most powerful gods in the pantheon. His position was important because the Mesopotamians relied on him for good weather that would lead to a bountiful harvest. Since irrigation and agriculture were such vital parts of Mesopotamian life, it makes sense that Enlil would be one of the most popular gods. His main city was Nippur, and he was regarded as the king of the gods since he possessed the Tablet of Destiny. His consort was Ninlil, and they had several children. including Nanna, Nergal, Enbilulu, and Ninazu.

He was worshiped by several empires, including the Sumerians, Hurrians, Akkadians, and the Babylonians, although the Babylonians eventually merged his attributes with their god Marduk.

Ninurta: The God of War

This god was the son of Enlil and developed from a peaceful agricultural god to a god of war. He was associated with peaceful aspects such as protection, and his consort was Gula, the goddess of healing. However, he was mostly known for his courage as a powerful warrior. The Babylonians held him in high esteem and often depicted him as riding a lion while carrying various weapons. There was a point when Enlil's worship declined slightly, and historians believe that was because the people began to favor Ninurta more, especially since he was seen as one of humanity's protectors.

Image of Ninurta

Unfortunately for the god, he wasn't accredited with having much knowledge, and he was often portrayed as a brute who would rather use force than reason.

Marduk: The Babylonian Lord of Gods

The Babylonians revered Marduk and dedicated their capital city, which eventually became the center of the world, to him. According to the Babylonians, he was the champion of the gods who earned his right to rule after defeating the goddess Tiamat and her champion Qingu. He had many attributes, including compassion, justice, healing, and magic. While he was very popular among the Babylonians, he also had worshipers all throughout Mesopotamia. For instance, the ancient Assyrians worshiped him as the son of Assur.

In the Babylonian myths, he is always depicted as a wise and fair ruler who often came to the aid of humans and gods alike. Besides protecting humans, he also kept the gods from fighting with each other, which earned him the title of “Shepherd of the Gods.”

Nanna: The Moon God

Nanna was also known as Sin, and according to the Sumerians, he was one of the most important gods in the pantheon. He is also one of the oldest Mesopotamian gods and was heavily featured in Enheduanna’s works. His main temples were located in Harran and Ur, but his worship was mainly focused in Ur. The goddess Ningal was his wife, and they were the parents of Utu-Shamash, the sun god, and Inanna. According to his cult, Nanna was the father of the sun, and his importance likely stemmed from a time when ancient tribes made up of hunters and gatherers relied on the moon to guide them.

He was represented by a crescent moon in religious iconography, and he was often depicted with a bull or a lion-dragon.

Shamash: The Sun God

Shamash was also known as Utu, Babbar, or Samas, and his consort was the goddess of dawn, Aya or Sherida. In some myths, the goddess Inanna was his twin, and the two shared a powerful bond. For some time, Nanna was more important than Shamash, as the ancient Sumerians placed more emphasis on the moon. However, in time, when they began to understand the process of agriculture a little better, Shamash became more important. By the time of Hammurabi, Shamash was believed to be a powerful protector as well as the governor of the universe who looked after soldiers, sailors, merchants, and travelers.

An image from the Tablet of Shamash

Gibil: The Fire God

The Assyrians credited Gibil with being the governor of the gods, but he was also known as the god of the forge, which would have endeared him to the Assyrians since they were master ironworkers. He was also known for being a god of justice who punished anyone who thwarted justice on earth. According to Mesopotamian myths, he had a vast knowledge about metalworking and was more intelligent than any of the other gods.

Ereshkigal: The Goddess of the Underworld

The Mesopotamians feared Ereshkigal since she was known as the Queen of the Dead. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, she is depicted as a vengeful goddess who killed the goddess Inanna after Enkidu killed her consort, the Bull of Heaven. However, she had to undo her actions by sending Inanna back to the living world after she was tricked by Enki. She was a fearsome goddess who ruled the underworld alone until the god Nergal joined her and became her consort. Ereshkigal is also featured in other Mesopotamian myths such as “Ishtar’s Descent” and the “Marriage of Nergal and Ereshkigal,” where she doesn’t come off as the kindest god.

Ishtar: The Goddess of Sexuality and Fertility

Ishtar was also known as Inanna and had many different roles. Inanna was widely loved by the Sumerians and even became as important as Anu, Enlil, and Enki. She was known as the Queen of Heaven and the protector of many Mesopotamian heroes, including Sargon the Great, who appointed his daughter, Enheduanna, as her high priestess. According to Mesopotamian myths, Inanna was given the sacred *meh* by her father Enki, which she took from the city of Eridu and moved it to the more modern city of Uruk. This myth was likely developed to explain the sudden rise of Uruk at the expense of the ancient city of Eridu.

She was also the goddess of war, prostitutes, love, and passion. Inanna was often depicted as a sexual being who refused to get married and used passion as a powerful tool. She was held in high regard by the ancient Mesopotamians, including the Babylonians, who dedicated an entire city gate to her. Her temples were located all over Mesopotamia, which shows how widespread her worship was.

While Inanna and Ishtar shared many traits, Ishtar is the more sexualized version. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, she set her eyes on the legendary king and tried to seduce him. The king was disgusted by her efforts and insulted her, which caused her to call the Bull of Heaven to come down to earth and punish Gilgamesh. This led to the death of both the Bull of Heaven and Gilgamesh's best friend Enkidu.

Ninhursag: The Mother Goddess

This goddess was possibly one of the oldest gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon, and she was accredited with being the goddess of fertility, growth, and life. She was seen as the protector of mothers and children, and her duties, included keeping an eye on children from conception until they were old enough to look after themselves. The Mesopotamians believed that she provided the children with the food that they needed so that they could grow up to be healthy. Her popularity stretched throughout Mesopotamia, and she was known by several names, including Damgalnunna, Ki, Nintur, Nintu, Aruru, Mami, Mama, and Belet-Ili.

An image of what is thought to be Ninhursag (right)

From the earliest times in Mesopotamian history, Ninhursag was given incredible importance and had several cults throughout the region. She was even given a place in the pantheon as one of the supreme gods, but when Hammurabi came to power, a lot of her influence was transferred to male deities. Many goddesses lost their status during this period, and in time, Ninhursag's identity was absorbed by other gods and goddesses.

Mesopotamian Religion

According to Mesopotamian mythology, humans were created to be helpers to the gods, and in return, the gods would take care of the humans. The ancient Mesopotamians relied heavily on their gods and goddesses and centered their lives around serving them. It was believed that the gods could live on earth in sacred temples. Every Mesopotamian city was built around a

temple. The cities usually had one massive temple in the middle of the city that was dedicated to a particular god, with smaller shrines and temples dotted throughout the city that belonged to other deities.

The temples had a sacred chamber that was usually filled with treasures where the god lived. Each temple had its own priesthood where priests would play music, pray, and take care of the god's statue. These statues weren't meant to simply represent the gods; as stated above, the Mesopotamians believed that the gods were in the statues. This meant that priests had to feed, wash, and entertain the statues. Worshipers could donate food, money, and other valuable items to the temple, which were then used in service to the god. Incense and meals were also offered to the statues; oftentimes, the statue had better meals than the city's residents.

Each god also had their own feast days, during which the priests would parade the statue through the streets of the city so that the god could see different scenery. It was also a chance for the residents to interact with the gods. Gods could even go visit each other, and priests would transport statues to different cities from time to time.

The gods were immensely important to the ancient Mesopotamians, and no one was exempt from their worship. Even the self-proclaimed god-kings had to pay tribute to the pantheon, especially the supreme gods whose decrees were absolute and final.

Conclusion

The story of human civilization began in the region of Mesopotamia, where humans progressed from small nomadic tribes to massively influential empires that changed the course of ancient history. Over the span of thousands of years, people went from living in reed huts in tiny villages that were washed away by the Euphrates or Tigris Rivers to building magnificent cities that lasted for hundreds of years.

The first cities only had a few thousand citizens, but they began to develop when the citizens of villages began to merge together and build larger buildings. These cities were based around holy sites that eventually became elaborate temple complexes and towering ziggurats. The fertility provided by the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers allowed nomadic tribes to become farmers, and eventually, strict social hierarchies began to form. Warriors, artisans, and priests began to find their place in society, and priests took the lead in the communities when a need for rulers grew. In time, tribal priest-kings became kings, and religion and state developed their own roles.

While the priestly class lost some of its power, religion never lost prominence in Mesopotamian society. This is evidenced by the fact that every Mesopotamian city had a temple at its center. Eridu, a city that is widely considered to be the first true city in history, was thought to be the home of the deity Enki, who was known for being a friend to humans. In time, Uruk rose to prominence, and the Mesopotamians accepted that Enki had passed the all-important *meh* to his daughter Inanna, who took it to her home in Uruk. Eridu was seen as an outdated city, while Uruk became the first urbanized city that attracted the young and energetic. Its neighbor, Ur, also reached glittering heights and dominated the culture of Mesopotamia for many years. Art and trade flourished in these cities, which enriched its citizens and left behind many wonders for modern historians to excavate and analyze.

As time passed, Ur and Uruk faded somewhat when the Akkadians and Assyrians came to power and transferred influence to their capital cities of Akkad and Assur. One of the greatest kings in history, Sargon the Great, rose to power and turned his city into the center of a prominent empire. Sargon and his army unified the region and subdued all the important Mesopotamian cities. The Akkadian Empire continued to exert its influence under powerful kings who began likening themselves to the gods they worshiped. While the

Akkadians developed an enviable empire, they were toppled by fearsome hordes of Gutians who streamed from the Zagros Mountains and desecrated Sumerian culture.

Eventually, the Gutians were ousted from the region, and the prosperous Ur III period began. The Akkadians left behind a blueprint for the Assyrians, who established the city that they named after their principal god, Assur. This city remained prominent for over a thousand years while the Assyrians built the most powerful empire in the world. Their armies wielded the most sophisticated weapons, and their enemies were powerless to stop them. While the Assyrians were accomplished politicians and conquerors, they were hated and frequently had to deal with rebellions. Excavations at the sites of important Assyrian cities, such as Nimrud and Nineveh, have revealed the wealth and importance of the Assyrian Empire. When the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, died, the empire was ripped apart by a coalition of Medes, Persians, and Babylonians.

The Babylonians were responsible for building one of the most famous empires in all of history. King Hammurabi built up the Old Babylonian Empire, which united the Mesopotamians under one rule. Mesopotamia prospered under Hammurabi's reign, and he had the time to develop one of the earliest comprehensive law codes in the world. There were massive religious and cultural shifts during Hammurabi's rule, as the Babylonians considered Marduk to be the supreme god, and their capital city became a center of art and knowledge.

However, Hammurabi failed to set up a sustainable system of administration that would outlive him, as he was known for being a micromanager who wanted control over every aspect of his empire. When he died, he took his empire with him, and Babylon fell into a steady decline. While it was still a magnificent city, it was subjected to the empires and dynasties that succeeded Hammurabi. The Babylonians weren't content to fade into obscurity, and hundreds of years later, they gained independence under King Nabopolassar. The Neo-Babylonian Empire became a world power, and its capital city, Babylon, became the center of the world. King Nebuchadnezzar II was determined to build the most beautiful city in the world, and he succeeded. The empire fell about ninety years after its meteoric rise, as it suffered under the rule of Nabonidus and his son, Belshazzar, until Cyrus the Great conquered the city and allowed it to continue as a vassal state.

Over thousands of years, different dynasties and empires ruled over

Mesopotamia, which led to the development of agriculture, art, law, science, and many other factors that are crucial to human civilization. During that time, the Mesopotamians created an elaborate pantheon of gods who were responsible for the weather, life, death, and agriculture. The ancient Mesopotamians pioneered many tools and methods that are still used today, but they didn't have answers for life's biggest questions, such as mankind's purpose and why humans died. They found answers to these questions by creating gods who were responsible for these aspects of life, and they did their best to appease these gods.

They built cities dedicated to the gods, and many of these cities, such as Nippur, survived for thousands of years because of their religious significance. And while some cities never became the center of an empire, many of the city-states were important in their own right and featured fascinating histories pioneered by the dynasties that ruled them, which can be seen in the example of Lagash.

Mesopotamia had a rich and diverse history, a lot of which is still buried in the deserts of the Middle East, and the more information historians find, the more evident its influence on modern life becomes.

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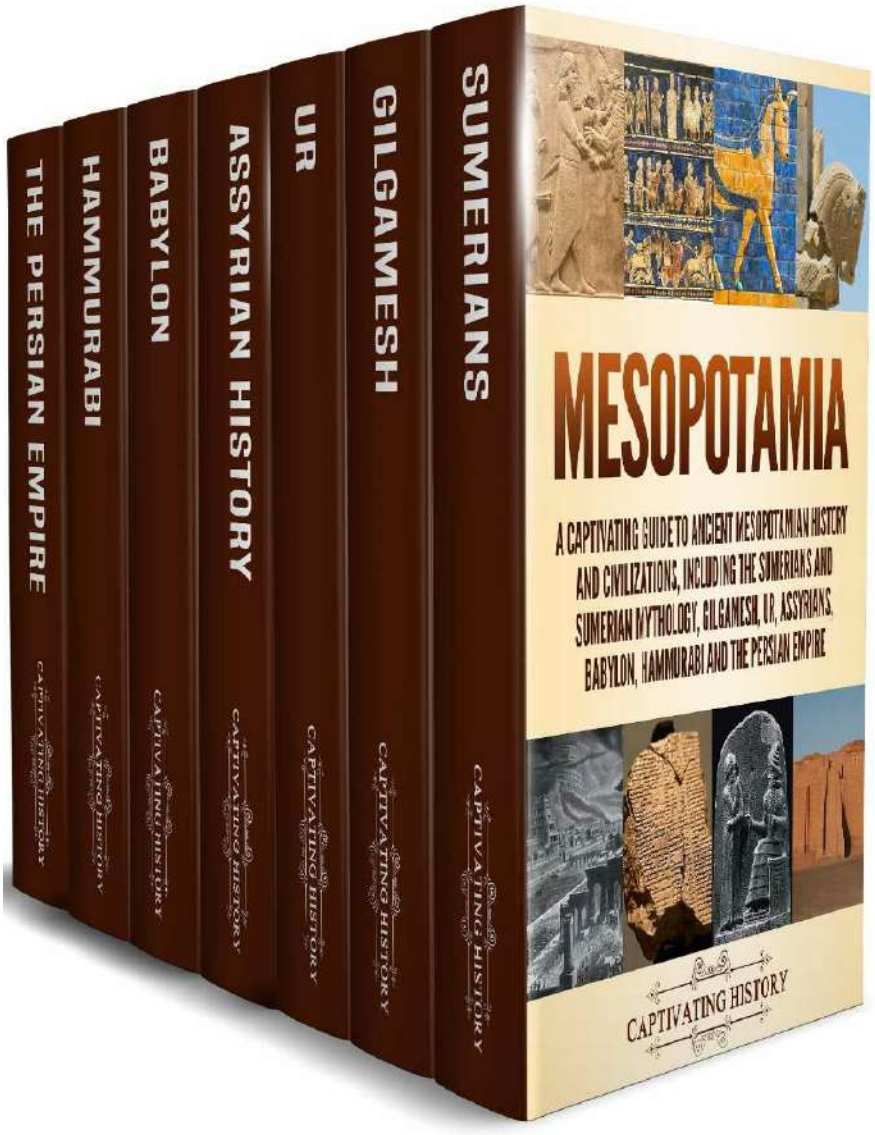

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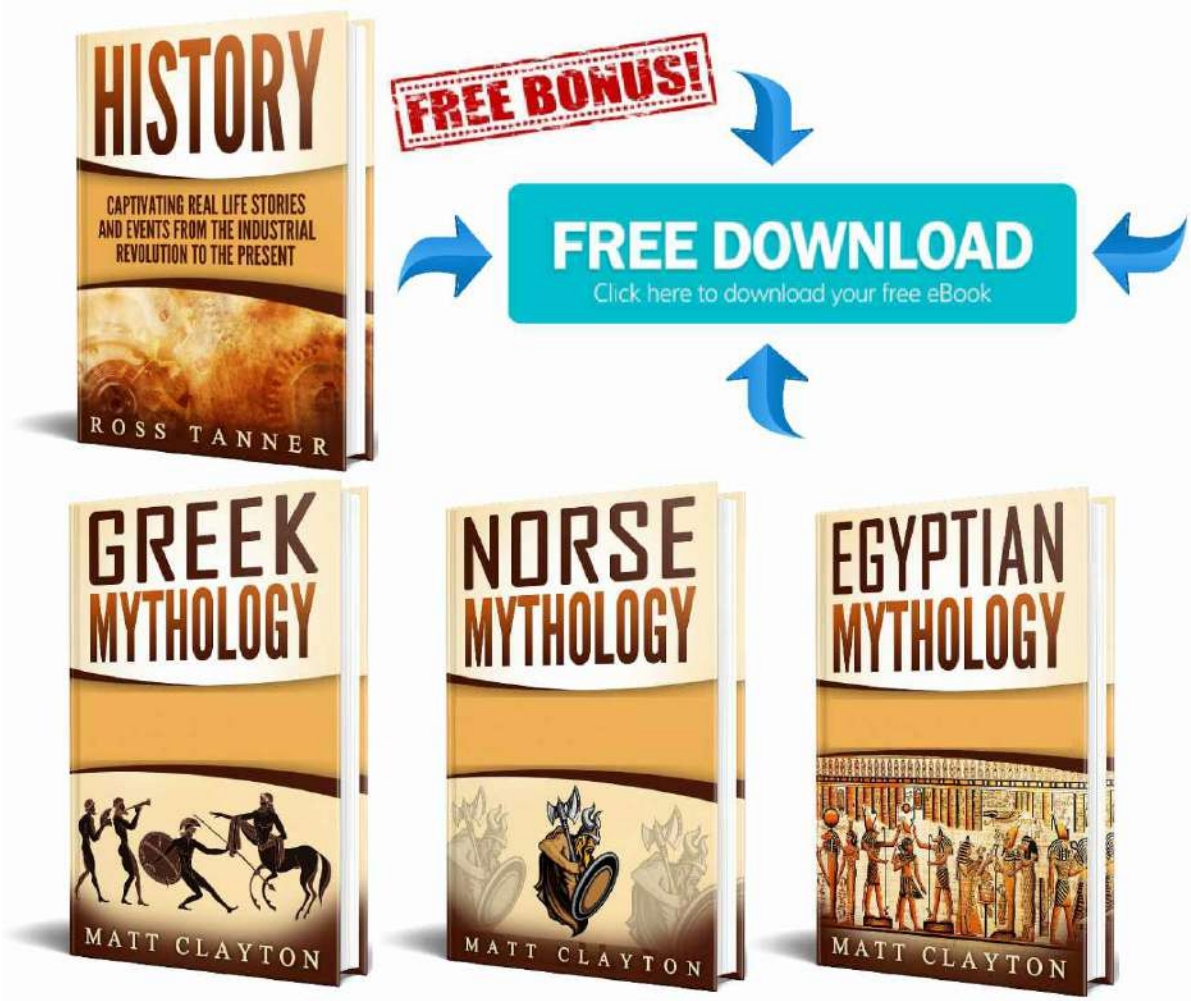

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